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Parrish

THE CASE AND THE GIRL

THE CASE AND THE GIRL

By RANDALL PARRISH

AUTHOR OF

mrades of Peril," "The Mystery of the Silver Dagger,"
"The Devil's Own," "Wolves of the Sea,"
"Bob Hampton of Placer," etc.

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THE CASE AND THE GIRL

CHAPTER I

THE LADY IN THE LIMOUSINE

WEST, still attired in khaki uniform, but wearing the red chevron of honourable discharge on his left sleeve, sat in the Club writing room, his feet comfortably elevated, endeavouring to extract some entertainment from the evening paper. The news was not particularly interesting, however, and finally, obsessed with the feeling that it would soon be time for him to seriously contemplate the procuring of suitable employment, the young man turned the sheet about rather idly, and ran his eyes down the columns devoted to classified advertising.

Half way down the first column, under the head of "miscellaneous," he paused and read a paragraph with some interest; then read it over again, emitting a soft whistle between his teeth.

"Well, by Jove!" he said to himself slowly, "That doesn't sound so bad either; out of the ordinary, at least. Say, Thompson," and he turned to

a tall young fellow busily writing at the adjoining desk, and shoved the paper under his eyes, pointing at the paragraph which had attracted attention, with one finger, "What do you make out of that, old man?"

The other, rather sober-faced, and slow of speech, read the advertisement word by word, with no change of expression.

"Rot," he said solemnly. "Either a joke, or some scheme on. Why? interested in it?"

"In a measure, yes. Sounds rather business-like to me. I've got a good mind to answer, and take a chance."

"You're a fool if you do, Matt," decisively, and turning back to his writing. "That is some game being pulled off, and the first thing you know, you'll be in bad. Likely as not it means black-mail. Besides there is no address."

"That's one thing I like about it," retorted the other; "They are in earnest, and taking no chances of having their purpose guessed at. There is a way to reach them, if the one answering is sufficiently in earnest. By Jove, I don't see how any one can get in bad, merely by finding out what it all means."

"Well, do as you please; you would anyhow. Only you have my advice."

West read the item again. He had been eighteen months in France, and his discharge from the army had left him bored and dissatisfied with the dull routine of civil life. He dreaded to get back into the harness of a prosaic existence; even his profession as a civil engineer had someway lost its charm. He had tasted the joy of adventure, the thrill of danger, and it was still alluring. This advertisement promised a mystery which strangely attracted his imagination.

"Wanted: Young man of education and daring for service involving some personal peril. Good pay, and unusual reward if successful. May have to leave city. Purpose disclosed only in personal interview."

As Thompson had pointed out, this was not signed, nor any address given.

West crossed over to an unoccupied desk, and wrote a reply, changing the wording several times, and finally making a clean copy. Thompson glanced across at him, but said nothing. The answer read:

To Advertiser: Am 26; late captain of Engineers; University graduate adventurous disposition. Would be glad to consider your proposition. Address, Box 57, University Club."

He placed this in an envelope, called a Club

messenger, and, handing the boy a sum of money, sent him over to the newspaper office.

Two days elapsed before an answer appeared in his box; a small envelope, addressed in a lady's handwriting apparently, and mailed from one of the sub-postoffices. West tore it open rather eagerly, and read the contents with surprise. The words within had been written by the same hand which appeared upon the envelope, but the language used gave him no clue to the purpose of the writer. The brief note read:

"Box 57
University Club.

"Your answer to advertisement makes a good impression, and I am willing to put you to the further test of a personal meeting. If you are in earnest in this matter, and quite prepared to assume the necessary risk, you will be at the north-west corner of Spaulding Park at 5:30 tomorrow afternoon. Do not come in uniform, but it will be well to bring evening clothes in a bag. Be sure of yourself, and be prompt.

"Very truly yours,
"The Advertiser."

West read this over, again and again, smoking furiously, and endeavouring to weigh each word. He saw Thompson in the other room, but decided not to submit the epistle to his criticism. The letter sounded honest and sincere; the writer evi-

dently had a purpose in view, and was selecting an agent with great care and secrecy. No hint as to what that object was would be revealed blindly—he must be tried in every way first; thoroughly tested as to both character and courage. Undoubtedly steps had already been taken to do this. The delay in reply would have afforded opportunity for some investigation, as his address would give the necessary clue to his identity. The request for evening clothes, however, rather reassured him; evidently his first plunge into this mystery was not to occur in any stratum of low society; no vast amount of personal danger could be involved in such preliminaries. The truth was, the note only increased his former interest in the case, and his determination to probe more deeply into its mystery. So the advertiser was a woman! This fact also stimulated his imagination, and rendered him the more eager. By Jove! he would see the thing through!

His decision was reached, yet West, although still young and adventurous, had received the rigorous training of the soldier, and learned lessons of discretion. He would go, but would make every effort to protect himself against any possible treachery. He had a room at the Club, and wrote a letter or two before proceeding to dress, arrang-

ing for their personal delivery in case he failed to return at a designated time; carefully examined his service revolver, and deposited it in the pocket of the business suit he decided to wear. Satisfied with these arrangements, he dressed rapidly, and then packed his bag, bearing it in his hand as he departed in ample time for the point of rendezvous. A cab took him to the place designated, and he found himself alone in a rather desolate spot, with which he was in no way familiar. No doubt he had passed there again and again, as a boulevard extended along one side of the small park, yet his memory retained no clear recollection of the place. There were a few small stores opposite, while the park itself was well kept, and populated almost entirely by nursemaids, judging from the number of baby carriages trailing along the walks. Back of the curb were a few benches, but West chose to remain outside, depositing his bag in plain view of any one passing, and then walked back and forth somewhat nervously. He was there several minutes ahead of time, and compared his watch by a clock in a church tower a block away. He had no knowledge of how he was to be approached, or identified, but his being requested to bring a bag containing evening clothes, somehow suggested riding, rather than walking, and

consequently his eyes followed more or less intently the constant stream of automobiles.

He grew restless, and more doubtful as the moments slipped past. Surely he could not have mistaken the place of appointment or the hour? He glanced at the scene to again reassure himself. No, that was impossible; the park name was plainly decipherable beside the entrance, and his watch coincided exactly with the clock in the tower. He stood beside his bag, staring up and down the boulevard, permitting his eyes to occasionally wander to the scene within the enclosure. Nothing rewarded his scrutiny. Then suddenly, without slightest warning, a black limousine whirled in alongside the curb, and came to a stop immediately in front of where he waited. The chauffeur, dressed in plain dark livery, stepped out, and threw open the rear door, without asking so much as a question. Except that the fellow stood there, looking directly toward him, his fingers on the latch, expectantly, West would not have known that he was wanted. Yet it was all so obvious he could not question. Silently he picked up his bag, and stepped forward. He saw no one within, but firm in the belief that the chauffeur must have his orders, he entered blindly, the door closing instantly behind him. The curtains were

drawn, the interior gloomy and indistinct, and the driver had resumed his seat, and started the motor, before West realized that he was not alone. In one corner of the wide back seat, drawn back from any possible observation from without, sat a woman.

At first glance he could only barely distinguish the outlines of her figure, dimly discernable against the dark background of the upholstery, but, as his eyes accustomed themselves to the faint light, her features also bacame dimly visible—enough so, at least, to convince him that she was young. Neither spoke for some moments, while the automobile gathered speed, and West had an uncomfortable feeling that the lady was watching him with great intentness. Slightly embarrassed, and uncertain as to his best course of action, the young man remained silent, his eyes on the burly back of the chauffeur, revealed through the front glass. He could only quietly await her explanation of this strange situation. The delay was not a long one. She laughed, nervously perhaps, yet with a sense of humour at the awkward position.

"Quite melodramatic, is it not, Captain West?" she asked, in a decidedly pleasant voice. "I trust it appeals thoroughly to that disposition for

adventure of which you wrote. I assure you I have arranged the details to the best of my ability."

"Nothing more could be desired, I am sure," he confessed, surprised at her tone, and glancing toward her. "I certainly am left completely in the dark, unable even to clearly distinguish my mysterious companion in adventure."

"And there really is no longer any occasion for such concealment." She lifted the heavy curtain beside her, permitting the grey light to rest upon her face. "I preferred not to be seen at the park for obvious reasons; but here, alone with you, such precaution is quite unnecessary. We are to be either friends, or enemies, so frankness is the best course."

He saw the face of a young woman of twenty-four, or five, with dark eyes and hair, her cheeks flushed with health and excitement, her lips smiling. It was a face of unusual attractiveness, not regular, perhaps, in any of its features, yet filled with character, and glowing with life. It was to him a totally unfamiliar countenance, but one which as instantly awakened his interest. He liked the girl, and believed in her.

"I can only thank you," he said, rather lamely.

"Although I do not understand now how we could ever become enemies. Surely, that is not a threat?"

"Oh, no, it is far too true. You have yet to learn what I require. Yet that was very nicely said. I take it to mean your first impression of me is not unfavourable?"

"Very far from it. I am already deeply interested in my task. If I lacked an incentive before, you have furnished it. I am only too glad I was the fortunate volunteer."

She laughed again softly, her eyes still on his face.

"Really, I had not anticipated such a sincere compliment. No doubt you learned these delightful speeches in France," she answered, a very faint tinge of sarcasm in the words. "However, this is a very serious matter, Captain West, and really has nothing to do with my personal appearance. I am, of course, being a woman, glad that I please you, but we must consider this particular affair from an entirely different standpoint. I am seeking neither flirtation nor compliment; merely a trustworthy agent. First of all, it is necessary that you comprehend this."

He bowed, impressed by her manner, and somewhat ashamed of his impetuousity.

"I accept the reproof," he said quietly, "and will endeavour henceforth not to offend in any way. I am entirely at your service."

"There is no offence; I merely thought it best there should be no misunderstanding. Now, I am sure, we can proceed intelligently. Indeed, I am going to frankly confess, I also like your appearance. This mutual liking ought to be half the battle. We have quite a ride before us yet; you may question me if you wish."

CHAPTER II

A SUDDEN ENGAGEMENT

WEST gazed out through the window, wondering where they were. In his interest in his companion, he had until this moment, taken no note of things without, nor did his eyes rest now upon any familiar scene. They were swiftly, and noiselessly, passing blocks of respectable residences, none of these particularly distinguished. Her sudden invitation rather startled him.

"You mean I am to question you freely."

"Assuredly; while I am to remain quite as free in my answers. That is perfectly fair, is it not?"

"At least, it sounds so. Where am I being transported then? And why the dress-suit?"

His questions evidently amused, for her eyes sparkled.

"Naturally that query comes first; and especially the dress-suit. You have the prejudices of your sex, I see, and without regret. I shall en-

deavour to reply catagorically, yet with reservations. We are going to a country home, where we dine, in company with a few guests."

"I see; I am first of all to be projected into society. Are any of these guests known to me?"

"God forbid; and I may even venture to predict that you will never care to know any of them again. You are to be present as my guest, and will so be welcomed."

"I feel the honour; but would it not be well under these circumstances for me to know more clearly whose guest I am? Suppose, for instance, I had to refer to our long friendship, it would be extremely awkward not to even be able to mention your name."

"My name! Why, of course, you do not know what it is. Well, really I am not altogether certain that I do either. We will therefore compromise on the one I am known by; which will be safer. Allow me, Captain West, to present to you Miss Natalie Coolidge."

She held out frankly a neatly gloved hand, which he as instantly took, and retained in his own, the girl making no immediate effort to withdraw it.

"This is very kind of you, Miss Coolidge," he acknowledged, adapting himself to her present mood, "But it seems there is no necessity for me

to present myself. Apparently my indentity is already known."

"Otherwise you would not be among those present," she admitted frankly. "You must surely realize that I needed, at least, to have some information relative to a man in whom I expected to confide. Telling secrets—especially family secrets—to strangers is not my specialty."

"Then, I judge you have not accepted me blindly?"

"No, I have not," earnestly, and now releasing her hand, "I do not think we ever really know any one except through personal intercourse; but I do know who you are, and something of what your life thus far has been. It was two days after I received your answer before I replied to it. This time was devoted exclusively to making me somewhat better acquainted with my correspondent."

"But how could you? I signed no name."

She smiled, again quite at her ease.

"The box number at the Club was amply sufficient. I have friends there; once possessed of your name and army rank, the department records at Washington furnished all further information. A Senator kindly attended to that end, and was also able to supply a little additional gossip through one of his Southern colleagues. So you perceive,

Captain, I am not altogether reckless. Are you interested in learning what I know?"

"I am; both from records and gossip. Will you tell me?"

"Willingly," and she checked the points off on her gloved fingers. "You are Matthew West, the only son of Judge Robert Peel West, of Atlanta, Georgia. Your mother, who was of the well-known Bullock family, died when you were about fifteen, and her widowed sister has since been the house-keeper. You are a graduate of the university of Virginia, being fourth in your class in Scholarship. Your engineering course was completed in Massachusetts, and you later became connected with the Wyant Contracting Company, of Chicago. You were here, however, only a very brief time, making but few acquaintances, when the War broke out. You immediately entered the first officers' training school at Fort Sheridan, graduating with the rank of First Lieutenant, and were assigned to a regiment of Engineers, among the earliest to sail for France. While there you were wounded twice, and cited once for special gallantry in the rescue of a seriously injured private. Your last wound caused your return to the United States on a special mission, and also won you the rank of Captain. Since then you have been honourably

discharged, but have made no effort to resume professional work. You are twenty-six, and unmarried. Is there anything else you care to know?"

"I think not; really your agency has been most efficient. Could you tell me also if I have ever been in love?"

"In love! Really I made no inquiries, as that did not interest me in the least. I am prepared to be confessed to, however, if you feel it necessary."

"I may have to confess later. Just now it might be better to let matters remain as they are. And so this review satisfied you that I was really the man you sought?"

"No, it did not wholly satisfy, but it looked promising. You were evidently courageous, and a gentleman. These qualities were essential; whether in other respects you measured up to my purpose, could only be ascertained through a personal interview. There was no other way."

"And now?" he persisted.

"Still encouraging. I must admit, although the test is not yet complete. However, we are now approaching the end of our journey. Before we turn in I am going to ask a favour of you—call me Natalie."

"Natalie; that will be easy."

"And also forgive me if I fail in always addressing you formally as Captain West. I presume your friends say Matt, do they not?"

"Some have that habit."

"Then I claim also the privilege."

She bewildered him, left him in wonderment as to what she would do next, but there was scarcely time in which to answer before the speeding limousine turned abruptly into a private drive-way, curving gracefully to the front of a rather imposing stone mansion, set well back from the road. West caught a glimpse of a green lawn, a maze of stables at the rear, and a tennis-court with several busily engaged players. Then they were at the side entrance, and a servant, in the same unobtrusive livery as the chauffeur, was quietly opening the door. He turned and helped his companion to emerge.

"Take the gentleman's bag to the Blue Room, Sexton," she said calmly, "and then lay out his evening clothes."

"Yes, miss."

"I will be in the hall when you come down, Captain, but there is no hurry."

West followed the servant up the softly carpeted stairs, finding the apartment assigned him not only extremely comfortable, but even elegant in its fur-

nishing. He stood at the window looking down on the tennis court, while Sexton opened the bag, and spread out the required garments on the bed. Evidently he was in a home of wealth and refinement. The grounds outspread before his eyes were spacious and attractive; in the distance he even perceived an artificial lake with paths winding enticingly along its shore, and through strips of woodland. Who could this strange girl be? this Natalie Coolidge? And what could she possible desire of him? These questions remained unanswered, yet continually tantalized. He could not even grasp her personality. In spite of her apparent friendliness, her irresistible smile, her lack of conventionality, there remained a certain reserve about the young woman he felt quite unable to penetrate. Whatever game she was playing she kept the cards securely in her own hands. He was not yet admitted to her confidence. He stood there immersed in these thoughts still, when Sexton spoke.

"Shall I assist you, sir?"

"No; it will not be necessary. You have laid out everything?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well; that will do, at present. What is the hour for dinner?"

"Seven o'clock, sir."

"I have ample time then. That will be all."

The man retired noiselessly, closing the door after him, and West began slowly to dress, rather amused at the care he took, that all details should be as correct as possible. Unquestionably the girl interested him oddly. She was original, a new type, and he made no effort to drive her from his imagination. He had not been long back from the war zone, his acquaintance in the city was extremely limited, and consequently this girl, thus suddenly brought into his life, had made a far greater impression than she might otherwise. Yet under any conditions, she would have proven noticeable, and attractive. He endeavoured to analyse what constituted this peculiar attractiveness, but without arriving at any definite conclusion. She was young, of course, and undeniably pretty, with eyes really remarkable, and a smile not to be easily forgotten. She possessed a sense of humour, and had left upon him a strong impression of frank sincerity. Yet in these qualities she did not differ so greatly from others he had known. Perhaps mystery had much to do with her power of enticement—a continual wonderment as to what she might do next. Then she was so self-poised, so confident of herself, so naturally informed.

All these things had their charm, and, coupled with her undoubted beauty, left his brain in a whirl.

He was satisfactorily dressed at last, although obliged to switch on the lights before this was accomplished. The reflection of himself in the pier glass quite met his deliberate approval, and he glanced inquiringly at his watch, rather eager to delve deeper into this adventure. It was a few moments of seven, and she would undoubtedly be waiting for him in the hall below. He descended the broad stairs, conscious of a thrill of expectancy; nor was he doomed to disappointment.

Miss Coolidge met him in the dimly lighted vacancy of the hall, with smiling eyes of welcome. They were mocking, puzzling eyes, the depths of which he could not fathom—they perplexed, and invited at the same instant. She was in evening dress, a creamy satin, revealing white shoulders, and rounded, beautifully mounded arms, visible beneath folds of filmy lace. If he had dreamed the girl attractive before in the plainness of street costume, he now beheld her in a new vision of loveliness. His heart throbbed at the sight, every nerve tingling to the intimate tones of her voice. And she met him in a more delightful mood of

informality than had found expression even during their afternoon ride. She was apparently in the highest spirits, eager to overstep all conventionality.

"Again you please me," she said, surveying him critically. "Really this is too much, the wonderful way in which you meet every test."

"You mean in clothes?"

"In everything, so far. Clothes—yes; do they not reveal the very soul of a man? I hardly think I could ever have forgiven if you had come down not looking the part you are to play."

"Nor could I have forgiven myself, if I am to enjoy the pleasure of taking you in to dinner."

"That privilege is yours even without the asking. But," quizzically, and glancing up frankly into his eyes, "You may not care when the time comes. For the great test arrives first. So, buck up, Captain, for you are going to have the shock of your life. Whatever you do, even if you feel that you are about to faint, don't, for my sake, let your face show it."

"But," he protested, "give me some warning, some opportunity to prepare for such an emergency."

"No," she laughed gaily, "there is no time; it is ordained to fall upon you like a thunder-bolt.

They are all in there waiting for us now. You will offer me your arm."

He accompanied her, amused, yet bewildered, through the wide archway into the more brilliantly lighted drawing-room. It was a magnificent apartment, containing a half dozen people. The one nearest the entrance was a man of middle age, exceedingly pompous and dignified, who immediately arose to his feet, expectantly. Miss Coolidge cordially extended her hand in greeting.

"So glad to learn you could be out, Judge," she said, the least perceptible hesitancy in her voice. "Permit me to present Judge Cable, of the Supreme Court; Captain West, my fiancé."

CHAPTER III

THE COOLIDGE HOME

FOR an instant West was absolutely helpless to assert himself. The calm assurance of the girl's voice in this unexpected introduction left his brain paralysed with bewilderment. Yet his features did not betray his condition, nor did he entirely lose control over himself. His fingers met the outstretched hand of the Judge, and he seemed to gaze calmly into the latter's searching eyes. Fortunately he was not compelled to speak, as Cable voiced his own surprise fluently.

"Well, well," he exclaimed. "This is certainly startling, Natalie. I am, indeed, bereft of words, yet I congratulate you, sir. Captain—Captain West, I think was the name? You are then in the service, sir?"

"Discharged from the Engineers."

"Ah, exactly. I can hardly adjust myself. Friends, come forward. I have to make an announcement extraordinary. It seems this sly

minx has arranged a surprise for all of us. Perchance this was the purpose of our little dinner party?"

"Oh, no, Judge," protested Miss Coolidge, her cheeks flushed, yet otherwise perfectly cool and self-possessed. West ventured to glance aside into her face, surprised at the quietness of her voice. "Really, this was unexpected, even to myself. I was not so much as aware that Captain West was in the city until a very short time ago. I am sure he will bear me out in this statement."

"I could not do otherwise, and be truthful," West felt compelled to admit. "The announcement was quite unexpected."

"But what is this all about?" asked a female voice eagerly. "Remember we have not heard, Judge Cable."

"It is my pleasure then," he said gallantly, bowing, and at once instituting himself as master of ceremonies, "to introduce to you, Miss Natalie's fiancé, Captain West—Mrs. Lonsdale, Professor Scott, Miss Margaret Willis, Colonel LeFranc, Mrs. Wilber Somers. Possibly there may be no necessity of my presenting the next gentleman—Mr. Percival Coolidge."

"Oh, but there is," the last mentioned interposed, a tall rather portly man, with grey hair and

moustache, "I must confess this is as much a surprise to me as to any one present. However," he grasped West's hand with apparent cordiality, "I hasten to add my congratulations, and to wish Natalie all the happiness possible."

The group slowly broke up, the members still discussing the undoubted surprise of this announcement, Miss Coolidge talking animatedly with Mrs. Lonsdale, and seemingly having forgotten West's presence in the room. He was utterly unable to even catch her eye, and finally found himself confronting Colonel LeFranc and Percival Coolidge, the latter instantly engaging him in conversation, evidently seeking more definite information.

"This engagement with my niece," he said uneasily, "must have been rather sudden? Even your name is quite unfamiliar to me."

"It was, indeed," admitted West, who had now completely recovered his nerve, and even begun to enjoy the situation. "Since my return from abroad."

"You were with the army in France?"

"In an Engineer Regiment. I have been in American only two weeks."

"Ah, indeed. And this is your home?"

Realizing that the elder Coolidge was diligently

searching for information, West decided the best method would be a full confession.

"Oh, no," he said candidly, "I am from the South—Atlanta, Georgia. My father is a District Judge, Robert Peel West, quite widely known, and my mother belonged to the Bullock family. I am a graduate of the University of Virginia, and also of the Massachusetts Polytechnic. Before the war I was connected for a short time, with a well-known firm of Engineers in this city, but, since my return, I have not resumed professional work. Having been wounded in France, I have felt entitled to a little rest after my return."

"Quite interesting, I am sure," Coolidge turned to the Colonel. "You are Southern also, I believe?"

"Very much so," was the quick response. "And I chance to know the name of Judge West rather well. I congratulate your niece on her choice of a life companion. There is no better blood in Georgia. I would be very pleased to hear more of your father, Captain West. I have not met him for several years."

West, by this time, thoroughly impressed with the spirit of the occasion, passed the ensuing evening rather pleasantly, although obliged to be always on his guard against any incautious remark,

and keenly interested in all that was occurring about him. He found the company rather pleasant and entertaining, although not quite able to gauge the real feelings of Mr. Percival Coolidge, who he imagined was not altogether satisfied with the state of affairs just revealed. The gentleman was outwardly cordial enough, yet his manner continued distinctively reserved, and somewhat cold. West, however, attributed this largely to the nature of the man, and finally dismissed the thought from his mind altogether. The person who continued to puzzle him most was Natalie Coolidge, nor was he able to approach her in any way so as to obtain a whispered private word of guidance. The girl unquestionably avoided him, easily able to accomplish this by devoting her entire attention to the other guests.

She appeared in excellent humour, and there was laughter, and brilliant conversation wherever she paused, but not once could he encounter her glance, or find her for a moment alone. Nor dare he ask questions of those he conversed with, so as to gain any fresh insight into this mystery. He ventured upon thin ice once or twice most carefully, but the information obtained was infinitesimal, although it bore to some extent on the problem confronting him. The Colonel innocently lifted

the veil slightly, permitting him to learn that this was a week-end party, and that Miss Coolidge was the mistress of the place, her parents having been dead for two years. Percival Coolidge, her father's brother, and a manufacturer in the city, was her guardian, and the affairs of the estate were not yet entirely liquidated. West drew the impression that Colonel LeFranc possessed a rather low opinion of the uncle, although he was careful to choose his words. Beyond this he apparently knew nothing of the family history, which he felt at liberty to communicate. As West had a delicacy in asking questions, the subject was pursued no further.

He was assigned to escort Miss Willis, a tall willowy blonde, and quite talkative, in to dinner, but her conversation ran largely to the theatrical offerings in town, and he found it impossible to change her trend of thought into other channels. The hostess sat nearly opposite, where she could easily overhear the young lady, whose voice was decidedly penetrating, so West made no serious attempt to be otherwise than complacent. Once the smiling Natalie appealed to him, familiarly calling him "Matt" across the table, and he responded with equal intimacy, yet her eyes avoided his, and it was plainly evident to his self-consciousness,

that her remark was merely part of the play. More and more her actions mystified and perplexed; he could not discover the key to her hidden motive, or guess at her purpose in this masquerade. Nothing remained but for him to go quietly forward, playing the part assigned. He had pledged himself blindly to her, and could only wait for the future to reveal the object of it all. Sometime he would succeed in getting the girl alone once more, and then he would compel a full confession.

But this was not destined to take place that evening. She coolly and deliberately defeated every effort he made to get her alone, and yet this was accomplished in a manner so as not to attract the attention of others. Even Percival Coolidge, who, West felt, was watching them both shrewdly, never suspected the quiet game of hide and seek being played under his very eyes. Nevertheless, it was this growing suspicion of the man which prevented West from indulging in more rigorous methods. As the evening progressed he became almost convinced that her principal object was to deceive this gentleman; that she really cared nothing for what the others might think, or say. And she did her part to perfection, being with West often, although never alone, speaking to him intimately,

and requesting of him little acts of service most natural under the circumstances. He played opposite her in a fourhanded game of bridge; he turned the leaves of her music when she sang, and her arm rested within his as they all stood on the porch watching the moon rise. It was all a masterpiece of acting, so exceedingly well done, as to finally convince the young man that she was greatly in earnest as to its success. She desired Percival Coolidge to have no lingering doubt of her engagement. And, finding all opportunity of explanation denied him, he yielded to the inevitable, and, for the evening at least, silently accepted his fate.

Nor did circumstances favour him when the company finally broke up, and retired for the night. He had thought this moment might be propitious, but she calmly outgeneraled him again, suddenly bidding the men remain and smoke as long as they pleased, and, disappearing herself up the stairway with Miss Willis, without so much as a glance backward, indicative of any lingering interest. West, convinced that her retirement was final, and early wearying of the rather drowsy conversation about him, soon sought his own room. It was eleven o'clock of a bright, moonlight night, and, feeling in no degree sleepy, West

seated himself at the window to finish his cigar. He heard the others pass along the hall on their way to the rooms assigned them, and finally all became quiet, even the servants apparently having retired. Outside was likewise noiseless, the moon revealing the scene almost as clearly as though it was day, yet leaving weird shadows to confuse the eye. Occasionally a belated motor car passed along the road, invisible because of the trees. Again and again his mind reviewed the strange events of the evening, unable to arrive at any definite conclusion. The harder he sought to delve into the mystery, the more obscure it became. The young woman herself thoroughly baffled him. If this was merely a test, it was certainly a most unusual one, and he hoped he had met the requirements to her entire satisfaction. He already frankly acknowledged to himself, at least, that she had become of personal interest to him. He felt a peculiar desire to be of service; but this desire was now permeated with a firm determination to know the whole truth. He would no longer remain ignorant of her object, for what purpose he was being used. She must trust him, and tell him frankly, if he was to continue to play a part. He would know whether this was tragedy or comedy, first of all.

He had, indeed, reached some conclusions already. These might not be correct, yet they were already implanted in his mind. The guests of the night were mere puppets, having no real connection with the game being played, utterly ignorant of what was going on behind the scenes. The only one present having any real part was Percival Coolidge, and West had taken an instinctive dislike to this man. Moreover, he had some reason to believe this feeling was warmly reciprocated; that the latter already suspected and watched him. Only one explanation flashed into his mind to account for Miss Coolidge's unexpected announcement of an engagement between them—this would excuse any future intimacy; would enable them to meet alone freely without arousing comment. She had deliberately chosen this course to disarm suspicion, and had failed to warn him in advance that she might test his nerve and discretion. This appealed to him as the most reasonable explanation of the situation. But beyond this vague guess, it was impossible to delve. He possessed no facts, no knowledge; he could only keep faith in her, and wait the time of explanation.

Tired by the uselessness of such thinking West finally sought the bed, and must have slept, although scarcely aware that he had closed his eyes.

Some slight noise aroused him. The door leading into the hall, which he had failed to lock, stood partially ajar, and his eyes caught the vague glimpse of a figure gliding swiftly through the opening. With one bound he was upon his feet, springing recklessly forward. The hall was dark, but for a patch of moonlight at the further end. Against this he caught an instant, flitting glimpse of the intruder. It was a woman, yet even as his eyes told him this, she seemed to vanish into thin air—the hall was empty.

CHAPTER IV

MISS COOLIDGE EXPLAINS

VAGUE and indistinct as was that fleeting vision in the moonlight, West felt no doubt as to the indentity of his visitor—the woman was Natalie Coolidge. His one glimpse of her vanishing figure assured him of this fact, and he drew back instantly, unwilling to follow. Where she had gone he neither knew, nor cared. She had come to his room secretly, supposing him asleep, and this surprising knowledge dominated his mind. What could such an act mean? This was certainly a home of respectability, of wealth. The guests being entertained were evidence of that; yet this secret entrance into his private apartment at such an hour suggested theft, or even some more desperate crime. There was mystery here, at least, a mystery beyond his power of discernment. However, this recognition rather hardened him to his task, than otherwise. He had been forced into the strange environment, and now meant to penetrate its every secret.

This time he locked the outer door carefully, and lay down on the bed, wondering if there would be any further developments. As he attempted to think, he was listening eagerly for the slightest sound of movement in the hall. There were none; the transom stood partially open, but no noise reached his ears from the outside; clearly enough the night prowler, assured that he was still awake, had decided to make no further effort. Doubtless she believed her escape had been unseen, or, at least, that she had remained unrecognized in the gloom, and would now resort to some entirely different method for achieving her end, whatever it could be. He could only wait, and watch for the next move. Perhaps the morning would bring full explanation. With this conception in his mind, his head sought the pillow, and he lapsed into unconsciousness.

The long training of army service caused West to awaken early, while the house was yet quiet, but with the dawn already red in the East. He crossed to the window, and looked out. It was a beautiful morning, the green lawn yet sparkling with dew; the estate was evidently a fine one, quite extensive and carefully attended to. To the right of the tennis court was a well arranged flower garden, criss-crossed by white paths, an ornate

summer-house in its centre, completely concealed by vines. Beyond this, conspicious against the green back-ground, West caught the flutter of a white skirt, realizing instantly that, early as the hour was, Natalie Coolidge was already up and about. He wondered if her presence might not be an invitation for him? Perhaps she had deliberately chosen this early hour, before the others awoke, to explain her strange conduct of the previous evening? At least, here was an opportunity to see and talk with her alone.

He dressed swiftly, and slipped noiselessly down-stairs, unlocking the front door, and emerging into the fresh air, without encountering any stray members of the household. Not even a servant was visible. He passed beyond the vine draped arbour before she realized his approach, and straightened up, a freshly cut rose in one gloved hand, the pruning shears in the other, welcoming him with a little laugh, her eyes full of demure mischief.

"I rather suspected army discipline had not entirely worn off," she said pleasantly, "and that you might still prove to be an early riser."

"And does this expectation account for your presence?"

"Not wholly; it has become a habit with me. I am always the first one out in the morning, and it will be an hour yet before breakfast is served. However, I promised to be very frank with you, did I not? Then I will begin now; this morning I really hoped I might see you for a moment before the others were stirring—we have so much to talk about."

"It certainly seems so to me," he responded honestly, yet not greatly encouraged by the amusement in her eyes. "The night has been full of surprises."

"During which you bore yourself exceedingly well. I have always read of the initiative of the American soldier, Captain, and in this case, you met my every expectation."

"Then I have passed the test?"

She hesitated, her eyes seeking his, and then falling before his gaze.

"Yes," she acknowledged slowly, "I can scarcely say anything else now; the—the affair has progressed so far already there is nothing to do but go on with it."

"Yet I remain wholly in the dark," he protested, "Surely you cannot expect real service when given so blindly?"

"No, I do not. I mean to trust you fully. It is the only way; but do you still truly wish to serve?"

"I am enlisted in the cause without reserve," he insisted warmly, "While I learned but little last evening, that little was enough to convince me there is something strange under the surface. Your calling me to your assistance is no joke—you actually need me."

"I need some one on whose judgment and courage I can rely," she answered earnestly, "and I believe now that you are the one. It is rather an odd situation, Captain West, but the circumstances surely justify my action. Perhaps I shall have time to partly explain now. Let us slip into the concealment of this summer-house; no one can approach without being seen."

It was dark and cool under the shadow of the vines, but, for a moment after they were seated, neither spoke. West waited expectantly for his companion to break the silence, and she seemingly found it difficult to begin her story. The flush deepened on her cheeks, and her lips parted.

"It really seems so ridiculous," she explained at last desperately. "Almost like a dream of fancy, and I hardly know how to put the situation

into words. If I were ten years younger I would almost be convinced myself that it was all imaginary, yet everything I tell you is true. I wonder if you will believe me?"

"Do not question that. I realize fully your earnestness."

"Yet I am going to test your credulity, just the same. But it would be very foolish to venture as far as I have already, and then fail to go on. So I'll tell you just what I know, and—and then leave it there. That will be the best way. Those people you met last evening have nothing to do with the story—none of them, at least, unless it may possibly be Percival Coolidge. I am rather afraid of him; I always have been. I believe he knows what all this trouble means, but I do not dare go and talk with him about it. That is really what is the matter, I suppose—there is no one I can talk to; they would only laugh at me. If you do, I shall never forgive you."

"I am not at all so inclined. Tell me the story from the very beginning."

"Yes, I will. My father was Steven Coolidge, and was very wealthy. He did not marry until late in life, and, I have reason to believe it was a great disappointment to his brother Percival that a child was born. Perhaps I ought not to make

such a statement, but much has occurred to impress me with his dislike—"

"He is your guardian?"

"Yes; you learned that last night?"

"From the Colonel; he seemed to enjoy talking, and naturally, I was curious. Has Percival Coolidge wealth of his own?"

"Only what my father left him, which was a considerable sum, and a limited interest in the business. He was very much dissatisfied with his share. Originally he was one of the two trustees in charge of the estate, but the other died, leaving him entirely in control. Before I was born he had confidently expected to inherit everything."

"The estate then is not settled?"

"Not until I am twenty-five; within a few days now."

"And your mother?"

"She died at my birth."

West leaned forward eagerly. "It is the estate then that troubles you?" he asked swiftly. "You imagine it has wasted?"

"No, not at all. They tell me it has increased in value. My father's lawyer assures me as to this. Percival Coolidge is a good business man, but something strange is going on behind the scenes. I cannot talk with the lawyer about it;

I can scarcely be sure myself. I—I am simply up against a mystery I am unable to solve. Everywhere I turn I run into a blank wall."

"But I do not understand."

"How could you expect to, when it is so utterly obscure to me? I seem to be fighting against a ghost."

"A ghost!"

"Yes; now don't laugh at me! Do you suppose I would ever have done anything as reckless as advertising for help if I had not been actually desperate? Can you imagine a respectable girl performing so ridiculous an act, as putting her whole trust in a stranger, inviting him to her home, introducing him as her promised husband to her relatives and friends? Why, it almost proves me crazed, and, in a measure, I think I must be. But it is because I have exhausted all ordinary methods. I do not seem to be opposing anything of flesh and blood; I am fighting against shadows. I cannot even explain my predicament to another."

"You must try," he insisted firmly, affected by her evident distress. "I must be told everything if I am to be of any value. A half way confidence can accomplish nothing."

"But it sounds so foolish; I am being haunted! I know that, yet that is all I do know."

"Haunted, in what way?"

"I do not even know that; but by a woman, I think—a woman who must strangely resemble me. She pretends to be me—to my friends, to my servants, at my bank. I never see the creature, but I hear of her from others. She has actually drawn checks in my name, imitating my signature, and having them cashed by clerks who know me well. She has given orders to my servants, and they protest that I gave them. She meets and talks with my friends in places where I never go. I am sure she has actually been in this house, and ridden in my car undiscovered. I am constantly reported as being seen at restaurants and hotels where I have not been, and with parties I do not know. This has been going on for a month now. I am unable to prove her an imposter, even to identify her. I have endeavoured to discuss the situation with a few people, but they only laugh at the strange idea. No one will listen to me seriously. My lawyer actually believes I am demented."

"And you conceived the thought that perhaps a total stranger might prove more sympathetic?"

"Yes," she admitted, "If he was young and adventurous; provided I interested him at all. It would seem to offer me a chance; and then, if

unknown to the party impersonating me, such a one might learn the truth unsuspected. Do you believe me, Captain?"

"I have no reason to doubt what you say. What you describe is not impossible, and there surely must be an adequate explanation for it. I mean to do my very best to uncover the mystery. You have these fraudulent checks?"

"Yes; one was returned to me only yesterday."

"I shall want them, together with one you drew yourself. Also the names of the servants who have apparently been approached by this person, and the circumstances."

"Certainly."

"You do not mind if I ask you one or two rather direct personal questions?"

"Assuredly not."

"What caused you to announce our engagement?"

She laughed, but from sudden embarrassment.

"It was silly, wasn't it! Really I do not exactly know; a sudden impulse, and the words were spoken. It occurred to me that our intimacy could be accounted for in no other way."

"So I supposed. Well, there is no harm done, but now, you understand, we must play out the game."

"Play it out?"

"Surely; act natural, permit no suspicion to be aroused. Even if I should feel impelled by duty, to kiss you, it is my privilege."

"Why—why, you cannot mean that!"

"Oh, but I do. This is no threat that I shall insist on carrying the matter to such an extreme, yet I must insist on the right if it becomes necessary. You would scarcely dare refuse, would you?"

"No," she confessed, her eyes suddenly meeting his, "I—I suppose not; but—but is it necessary to discuss that now?"

"Perhaps not, only I must know. You will play the game?"

Her eyes fell, the breath pulsing between her lips.

"I am not afraid," she said rather proudly. "Yes, I will play the game.

"Good! I knew you would. And now for the second question; why did you come to my room last night?"

She stared at him incredulously, the flush fading from her cheeks.

"Your room! I come to your room! Assuredly no; what can you mean?"

"Then it must be that I have already encoun-

tered the ghost," he declared smilingly. "For the very counterpart of you certainly visited me. I had a clear view of her in the moon-light, but she vanished down the hall. I would have sworn she was you."

"A woman?"

"Absolutely a woman; flesh and blood, no doubt as to that."

"When was this?"

"After midnight."

"It was not I, Captain West; please believe that—but hush; there comes Percival Coolidge!"

CHAPTER V

WEST WINS THE FIRST HAND

THE newcomer stood at the edge of the front steps, and paused long enough to light a cigarette before descending. His features were as clear cut as though done in marble, and about as expressive. To all outward appearances, the man was cold, emotionless, selfish egotism written on every feature. For the first time, in the glare of the bright morning light, West took stock of the fellow, and realized his true nature. Instinctively he felt that here was the particular antagonist he was to be pitted against. Whatever might be the truth as to a strange woman, this man must be the controlling factor in any conspiracy. His companion must have sensed the same fact, for she swiftly drew back beneath the shadow of the vines.

"You meet him," she whispered, "alone. I would rather he did not find us together."

"But can you escape unseen?"

"Yes, under cover of the hedge. But be very careful what you say."

She had vanished before he could interpose, slipping away so noiselessly, he was scarcely aware of her swift action. His eyes followed the more deliberate movements of the man, who slowly descended the broad steps, pausing when once on the gravelled walk to glance curiously back at the house. West thought his interest centred on the open window of the room he had occupied, but this was merely a conjecture, for the delay was but for a moment; shortly after Coolidge strolled on directly toward the summer-house, the blue smoke of the cigarette marking his progress. West stepped carelessly forth from the concealment of the vines, watchful for any change of expression on the face of the other. There was none, not even a look of surprise, or a tightening of the lip.

"Ah! Captain," he said easily, tossing his stub aside, and drawing forth his case for another. "Glorious air this morning; the advantage of early rising; you indulge, I presume?"

"An army habit, I mean to do away with later. Thanks. I suppose breakfast is not ready?"

"Hardly yet," glancing about inquiringly. "My niece is usually out here at this hour, which accounts for my venturing forth. She is not here?"

"Not now, although there are evidences that she has been," indicating the gloves and pruning shears visible beside the walk. "We must have arrived too late."

"So it seems. You came with the same purpose, no doubt?"

"If you mean the hope of encountering Natalie, your guess is correct. She would not give me a word last night, and has even overturned my plans this morning. Does she play hide and seek with you also?"

"Does she! One never knows what she will do. But this last escapade is the strangest of all."

"You refer to our engagement?"

"Assuredly; I had no warning, no conception of such a thing."

"Do you mean, sir, that she had never consulted you? never even mentioned me to you before?"

"Exactly. You are aware of who I am, I presume? the position I hold relative to her property?"

"Certainly; you are her uncle and guardian. Under the terms of the will you remain in full control until she is twenty-five, now almost at hand, except for an annual income payable to her monthly. Is not that the situation?"

"You have apparently made very careful in-

quiry," he commented with a perceptible sneer. "No doubt this was a matter of deep interest to you."

"Of some interest, I confess," acknowledged West, controlling his temper. "Although my information has not come from inquiry. Miss Natalie was kind enough to talk to me about her affairs, presupposing my interest in them. However, I assure you, I have no personal ambition along this line."

"Indeed; not fortune-hunting then?"

"Far from it," good humouredly, but keenly aware that he was touching Coolidge. "My family is far from poverty stricken, and I have a very good profession. It is quite right you should know this."

"What profession, may I ask?"

"Civil Engineer."

"But not established, I imagine?"

"I had very good connections before the war. Since returning from France, I have made no effort to renew these, or seek others. I, of course, expect to do so later, and shall be in no way dependent upon Miss Coolidge's fortune."

"Although quite willing to share it, I presume?"

"I think you have insinuated that often enough,"

returned West, at last fully aroused by the insolent words and manner of the other. "Perhaps it may be well for us to have a plain understanding without further delay, Mr. Percival Coolidge. My engagement to Miss Natalie may be sudden and unexpected—perhaps not altogether pleasant from your standpoint—yet it hardly warrants you in thus attributing to me mercenary motives. As a matter of fact, I was not aware until last evening that she was an heiress to considerable property. I knew nothing of her relationships. I will say, however, that now I feel perfectly justified in showing an interest in her affairs. As I understand matters, you are her guardian under the special provisions of your brother's will?"

"You are perfectly right, sir, and I should have been consulted previous to this engagement." Coolidge said with dignity. "Even now it is subject to my approval."

"I think not. Your guardianship was merely a special provision of the will, with reference to the estate. So I understand, at least. At twenty-one, she became mistress of her own personal affairs, and no longer needed to consult you."

"I controlled her income."

"Only the surplus; a certain sum was to be paid

her each month until she was twenty-five; then the entire estate came into her possession. Beyond this you exercised no legal authority."

"You seem well posted."

"The lady herself informed me as to these facts."

"Since yesterday?"

"Yes, since yesterday."

"Where, may I ask?"

"In the summer-house here, a few moments ago."

Coolidge gave utterance to an oath, which burst from his lips before it could be wholly restrained.

"Damn you!. just what is your game?" he exclaimed roughly, forgetting his pose. "Are you trying to get your nose into my affairs?"

"Most certainly not," returned West coolly, yet facing the other with a steady eye. "I can have no possible interest in your affairs. But I may be led to investigate those of Miss Coolidge, if she should so request. It seems she possesses no one to represent her at present—not even the family lawyer."

"What do you imply by that remark?"

"That she has gone to you, and to the attorney, who represents the estate, relative to some very

strange occurrences of late, only to be laughed at. No effort has been made to relieve her anxiety."

"You mean that fool story about some one else pretending to be her?"

"It cannot altogether be a fool story when this mysterious party passes forged checks at the bank."

"There was only one; that means nothing; the girl isn't using good sense. So this is the stuff she is filling you up with? And you propose investigating her wild imaginings, hey? By Gad, you are going to have an interesting time."

"I hope so; at least I am hoping to discover some truth."

"Good. I wish you well," and his tone was one of decided relief. "Your adventures ought to prove quite amusing."

Coolidge laughed heartily, the whole affair apparently taking on a new aspect, now that he felt he comprehended the real purpose of the other.

"Oh, by the way, West, you must pardon me if I send Sexton into your room for a valise I left there. You see I occupied that suite until you came."

"Oh, indeed," surprised, "I noticed no other grip there."

"It is in the closet. That has always been my room whenever I visit here. I do not know why Natalie decided to change me this time—naturally wished to reserve the best for you, I presume."

"Very kind of her, I am sure. There is Sexton now."

"Which means breakfast is served. Shall we go in?"

The two men walked slowly up the gravelled path, leading to the side door. West's thoughts were busy with this new discovery. Had he inadvertently stumbled upon a clue? So he had occupied the room usually reserved for Percival Coolidge. Perhaps here was the explanation of the coming of his strange visitor. If so, then it was already clearly evident that whatever the plot might be, this fellow had a hand in it. West glanced aside at the face of his unconscious companion, deciding quickly to venture a chance shot.

"Were you expecting a caller last night?" he asked calmly.

Coolidge wheeled about, startled out of his self-control.

"A caller! Of course not. What put that in your head?"

"Because I had one, in that room you say you

always occupied. The visitor vanished as soon as I was seen, and the thought occurred to me just now that you might have been the one sought."

"Perfectly absurd, West. You must have had a night-mare. What did she look like?"

"Oh, I only had a glimpse in the moon-light; resembled a ghost more than anything else."

"And just about what it was," with a laugh of relief. "Some dream you better forget about. Come along; they are waiting on us."

They passed up the steps together; and into the pleasant breakfast room, where the remainder of the company were already gathered. Coolidge was again perfectly at his ease, genially greeting the guests, and had apparently already dismissed the incident from his mind. Evidently even West did not consider it of any serious importance; he had clearly enough not recognized the intruder, and either decided the whole affair a freak of imagination, or else, at the worst, some midnight escapade of a servant. But West's mind had in reality settled on a point which Coolidge overlooked. He had gained the very information desired. He had carefully refrained from even suggesting the sex of his mysterious visitor. Percival Coolidge knew, without being told, that the caller was a woman. Then he also knew who that woman was.

CHAPTER VI

UNTANGLING THREADS

THE morning meal proved delightfully informal, Natalie gracefully presiding, and apparently in the highest spirits. West found his place reserved on her right with Miss Willis next, and, between the two, was kept extremely busy. The Colonel sat directly across the table, with Percival Coolidge just beyond the hostess. No intimation of anything wrong burdened those present, the single servant silently performing his duties to the constant laughing chatter of those about the table. Even Coolidge, somewhat distant at first, yielded finally to the prevailing humour, and joined freely in the conversation.

This turned at last to the plans for the day, revealing a variety of desires, which Natalie arranged to gratify. The Colonel and two of the ladies expressed an inclination to attend church, the limousine being offered them for the purpose. Others decided on a match with the racquets,

while Coolidge, rather to the surprise of the lady, suggested that Natalie accompany him into the city on a special errand of mercy. At first, amid the ceaseless clatter of tongues, West was unable to grasp the nature of his plea, or her reply, but finally overheard enough to arouse his personal interest, especially when his own name was mentioned in the discussion.

"I was not aware you ever concerned yourself in such matters," she said soberly. "Is this a particular case?"

"Decidedly so; the man before he died, was in my employ, but I did not learn until late yesterday of the condition in which his family was left. I understand something must be done for them at once. You are always interested in such cases, so I supposed you would accompany me gladly. It is extremely disagreeable duty for me."

"It must be attended to today?"

"The case is very urgent I am told."

"But how can I leave my guests—especially Captain West?"

West leaned forward.

"Do not hesitate on my account. I can easily amuse myself; or, if there is room, and it is not disagreeable to Mr. Coolidge, I might enjoy being of the party."

"Why, of course," she coincided eagerly. "Why couldn't he come along? There will be plenty of room if I operate the car. It is a case of destitution of which Uncle Percival has just learned—a widow and three children actually suffering. Surely it can do no harm for Captain West to accompany us?"

Coolidge exhibited no enthusiasm over the proposition; indeed West felt his response almost discourteous, yet this very suspicion aroused his own desire to make one of the party. The fellow evidently disliked him instinctively, and would exert every influence possible to discredit him in the eyes of Natalie. The suggestion even came that this sudden call to charity might prove only an effort on Coolidge's part to get the girl alone where she could be plainly talked to. The man was not pleased with this new proposal, that was evident enough; but the niece unquestionably desired him to accept the invitation. Not only her lips, but equally her eyes, pressed the matter, and West experienced no hesitancy in saying yes.

"Why, of course I will go," he returned heartily, "and I will be ready whenever you are."

"About half an hour then."

He retired to the room upstairs, partly for the purpose of exchanging his coat, but also half

tempted to make a hasty examination of the valise which Coolidge had thoughtlessly left overnight in the closet. The conception had already taken strong hold on his mind that his visitor of the evening before had been the mysterious impersonator of Natalie Coolidge; and that she had come there with some deliberate purpose—no doubt a secret conference with Percival. If her resemblance to the mistress of the house was as remarkable as he had been led to believe, her entrance to the place would be comparatively easy of accomplishment, and the danger of discovery correspondingly small. It never occurred to him to question Natalie's story. To be sure there were details he found it difficult to fully accept as true, but the girl certainly believed all she had told him. She denied earnestly having been the one invading his room, and he believed her implicitly; yet the person who had visited him was so closely her image as to make it still seem almost an impossibility that she could be a separate individual. Nothing less than Natalie's own word would have brought conviction. And this person had supposed she was visiting the apartment occupied by Percival Coolidge. This was the only satisfactory explanation of her presence there; whether she came that night for the first time, or as a supplement

to other similiar visits, it was unquestionably Coolidge whom she sought.

For what purpose? To West's mind only one object appeared probable. The man was too far advanced in life—certainly much above sixty from his appearance—to be involved in a love affair with so young and attractive a woman. Moreover in such a case she would scarcely seek him out here in this private home, where he was merely a transient guest; he would never venture to use a place like this as a rendezvous. That was unthinkable. Some other purpose, demanding immediate attention, must furnish the reason for her venturing to enter this house at such an hour, and coming directly to the room where she supposed Coolidge to be sleeping. To West's mind there could be but one answer. The two were mutually involved in a conspiracy of some nature, undoubtedly connected with the approaching settlement of the Coolidge estate. This girl, so strangely resembling Natalie, had in some way been discovered by the scheming guardian, who was now using her for his own selfish ends. The plot had been carefully perfected, and the time must now be near for execution. This girl had been selected, and trained to act a part—the part of Natalie Coolidge. Her ability to deceive had been

tested in various ways. Now the moment approached when they were ready to play out the real game. Yet the nature of that game was in no way apparent. He could only keep quiet, and wait for some further development, even appear indifferent, while he secretly watched every suspicious movement of Percival Coolidge.

It was not at all probable the satchel contained any criminating evidence, yet the temptation was strong to obtain, if possible, a hasty glance at the contents. But for this he was already too late, scarcely reaching the room indeed, before Sexton appeared, announcing his mission. West, perched on the arm of a chair, smoking, and watched the man bring forth the valise, and start toward the door.

"Coolidge tells me he usually occupied this room," he ventured curiously, "How did it happen I was put in here?"

Sexton paused, and faced about respectfully.

"It was upon orders from Miss Natalie, sir, But she did not mention the change in time to remove the bag. The truth is, I forgot, sir, that it was here."

"Oh, I see; this is not the grip he usually travels with then?"

"No, sir; this was sent down in advance, sir.

Mr. Percival Coolidge is here quite frequently."

"Naturally. As I understand he has no home of his own?"

"No, sir; he was never married, sir. In the city he stops at one of the big hotels. Of late he quite frequently spends the end of the week out here, sir. Of course he is deeply interested in the prosperity of the estate."

"As the guardian of Miss Natalie, you mean?"

"Just so, sir."

"How long have you been here, Sexton?"

"Sixteen years, sir."

"You knew Miss Natalie's father then, and must enjoy the place to remain so long?"

"It has been very pleasant, sir, until the last month or so," regretfully, yet evidently glad of the opportunity to talk, lingering with one hand on the knob of the door. "Since then things haven't been just the same."

"In what way?"

"Well, I don't exactly know, sir. Miss Natalie seems to change her mind, an' we never can please her. That's the trouble mostly. Last night I waited up until you all went to bed, an' then locked the house, the way she told me to. But that didn't suit her at all, for she stopped me on the stairs, an' made me go back an' leave the side

door unlocked—just said she'd attend to that herself."

"Miss Natalie told you? You are sure, Sexton?"

"Oh, it was her, sir; there was a light burning in the hall, an' she was all dressed up as though she was goin' out. 'Taint the first time, either. I ain't got no right to say anything, but it puzzles me what she wants to go out for at that time o' night. And I thought maybe I ought to speak to Mr. Percival Coolidge about it."

"No. I wouldn't, Sexton," said West quietly. "It would likely enough only get you into trouble. Probably she cannot sleep well, and so walks in the garden. Anyway this is none of our business, my man. Where are Miss Natalie's apartments?"

"In the other wing, sir; the first door beyond the head of the stairs."

"And the door you were asked to leave open?"

"At the farther end of the hall."

As West made no further effort to continue the conversation, but began to carelessly roll a cigarette, Sexton slipped silently through the opening, the valise in his hand, and closed the door behind him. West touched a match to the cigarette, scarcely aware of the action.

This attempt to dig information out of a serv-

ant was not a pleasant experience, yet he felt that in this case it was fully justified. To be sure he had gained little, yet that little helped to clear away the fog, and sustain the girl's theory that she was being impersonated by another even to her own servants. If West had retained any lingering doubt as to what had occurred the previous night, this doubt had entirely vanished in the face of Sexton's testimony. His visitor, and the one who had ordered the servant to leave the side door unlocked, had been the same—not Natalie Coolidge, but strangely resembling her. Whoever she was, she knew the house well, and possessed some means of entrance. Whatever else her purpose might be, one object was clearly connected with the presence there of Percival. She had sought his room, fleeing immediately on discovering it to be occupied by another. Very well! this meant that he already had two distinct lines of investigation opened to him—the woman, and the man. The first was like pursuing a shadow, but Coolidge was real enough. He determined to keep in touch with the fellow, confident that he would thus be eventually led to a discovery of his companion. Beyond all question, they were involved in the same scheme of conspiracy. West had deliberately arrived at this conclusion, rather

pleased at his success, when a gentle knock sounded at the door.

"What is it?"

"Sexton, sir. Miss Natalie has the car at the door, and is waiting for you."

"All right. I will be down immediately."

CHAPTER VII

A VISIT TO THE INDIGENT

THE guests had either retired to their rooms, or were wandering about the spacious grounds; at least none were in evidence when West emerged on to the side terrace, where Miss Natalie and Percival Coolidge waited. The car was an electric runabout, the single broad seat ample for the three, and West found himself next to the girl who took charge. Few words were exchanged until they turned into the main highway, headed toward the city. Even then conversation scarcely touched on the special object of their trip. Indeed, Coolidge seemed inclined to avoid the subject entirely, turning the conversation into other channels whenever the matter was broached. This was so persistently done as to arouse West's notice, but Natalie appeared indifferent, interested only in her guidance of the car.

It was not a long ride, the point sought being a short submerged street in the southwestern sec-

tion of the city. To West this district was entirely unknown, even the street names being unfamiliar, but he learned through the conversation of the others that they were in the neighbourhood of some of the Coolidge factories, many of the surrounding houses being the homes of employees. Percival called his attention to a few of these, more substantial than the others, as evidence of the wages paid in their establishments, and also expatiated to some extent upon the benevolent oversight shown their workmen. The girl, however, remained quiet, her attention concentrated upon the street.

Indeed it needed to be if they were to escape accident, for the streets traversed were, on this Sunday morning, evidently filled from curb to curb with children engaged in all manner of games, with their elders massed on the steps in front of the houses, watching them apathetically. The runabout felt its way cautiously forward through the jostling throng of screaming youngsters, and finally turned into Arch Street, only two blocks in length, with low, two storied, wooden cottages on either side. Percival, plainly nervous at the surroundings, indicated the place sought in the middle of the first block, and Natalie ran the car up against the curb.

"Is this the place?" she asked doubtfully, eyeing the rather disreputable cottage, which seemed deserted. "I have never been here before. What a mass of kids! Do they always play like that in the street?"

Coolidge unfastened the door, and stepped out.

"Yes, it's all right," he answered sharply. "You might wait here, West; we'll only be gone a few minutes. Come along, Natalie."

The girl hesitated, evidently not altogether satisfied.

"Is it necessary that I go in?" she asked.

"That was why I asked you to come," impatiently, "Because you understand these matters, and, being a woman, can judge better what steps should be taken. Come; it will only require a few moments—West won't mind."

"Certainly not," the younger man said heartily, "I shall be very comfortable; don't bother about me."

He had a distinct impression that Coolidge did not desire his company any further, yet this suspicion aroused no resentment. This was a matter with which he was in no way concerned, and the only interest he felt was strictly impersonal. His eyes followed the two as they advanced up the board walk to the front door of the cottage, and

he felt a measure of surprise at seeing Coolidge calmly open the door without knocking. Both disappeared amidst the darkness within, and he dismissed the whole affair from his mind almost instantly. Sinking comfortably back in the seat, his gaze centred on the maze of children playing in the street. Their antics amused him for some time, but, at last, he began wondering at the delay of those within, and his mind drifted to the peculiar conditions with which he was confronted. Over and over again he reviewed the facts told him, and compared these with his own observations. That something was wrong was beyond doubt; he could no longer question this, but no satisfactory clue to the mystery had yet presented itself. If some conspiracy was on foot against Natalie, what could be its object? and who were directly involved? There was apparently no way to settle this, except to wait patiently for some move on the part of the others. Any attempt at guessing would only lead him astray. Seemingly, Percival Coolidge was the only person who could be directly interested should misfortune occur to his niece; he was the guardian of her inheritance, and responsible for what remained of her father's estate. Undoubtedly he also was the next heir at law. His interest in the matter was therefore

easily figured out. Yet there was nothing to prove that the fellow was a villian at heart, or had any reason to attempt desperate methods. The mere fact that some other woman amused herself in pretending to be Natalie proved nothing criminally wrong. It might be a mere lark, with no vicious object in view. Indeed, but for the deep interest West already felt in the girl herself, he would have dismissed this angle of the problem entirely from consideration. It seemed far too melodramatic and improbable to be taken seriously, although, from mere curiosity, he purposed to round up this masquerader, and satisfy himself as to why she was thus publicly impersonating the girl. Yet this appeared a matter of minor importance, his real task being to learn the condition of the Steven Coolidge estate, and whether or not, Percival had administered it justly. Once satisfied upon that point, he would know better what further steps to take. His whole mind had unconsciously centred upon a distrust of the man. He believed him to be a sneaking scoundrel, at present engaged in seeking some means for gaining possession of the trust funds left in his care. And yet, West had to confess to himself that this belief was largely founded upon prejudice—confidence in Natalie, and a personal dislike of the man him-

self. He possessed no proof of the fellow's perfidy, nor had he even determined in his own mind the means to be employed for learning the truth. He had nothing to build upon but the statement of the girl, which was extremely vague in detail, and largely mere suspicion. The more thoroughly he analyzed the situation the more complicated it became, and the less confident he felt regarding an early solution. If Coolidge was engaged in some criminal scheme the man was certainly shrewd enough to carefully cover his trail. It was no sudden temptation to which he had yielded, but a deeply laid plan, formed, perhaps, as long ago as his brother's death, and now just coming to a head. Even the books of the estate might have been so carefully manipulated as to leave no clue. Besides West possessed no authority by which to examine the books, or even question the bankers in whose hands the funds were supposed to be. The only immediate hope of striking a trail apparently lay in his discovery of the strange woman who was impersonating Natalie Coolidge, and learning her object in carrying on such a masquerade. Of course, even that might lead nowhere in particular, as she might be merely amusing herself, and have no connection with

Percival whatever; yet such an investigation offered a chance not to be neglected.

His glance took in the surroundings, but with no conception that they would have any direct bearing upon the mystery he was endeavouring to solve. It was a block of irregular houses, a tenement on the corner, a dirty looking brick, the other houses of wood, mostly two stories in height, rather disreputable in appearance, but the one before which the machine waited, was a frame cottage, well back from the street, and rather respectable in appearance, although it must have been some years since last painted. Its original white was dingy, and the tightly closed blinds gave an appearance of desertion. The door was shut. The chimney indicated no sign of smoke, the front yard gave every evidence of long neglect.

An urchin, chasing a ball, plunged recklessly beneath the auto, emerging with the sphere in his grimy fist. West stopped him with a question.

"Who lives in there?"

"I do' know."

"You don't know? Live 'round here, don't you?"

"Sure; but these folks just come in. They

ain't got no kids. G'wn; what yer asking me fer? Here ye are, Micky!"

"Wait a minute. Here's a dime for you. You say these people just moved in?"

"Yep."

"When?"

"Couple days maybe. Shucks, mister, I do' know. Hooligans moved out 'bout a week ago, an' then, a while after that, these guys moved in. I ain't seen nobody round, but a sorter middlin' ol' woman. Maybe Micky knows who they be—he lives in that next house. Hey, Micky; here's a guy wants to ask you som'thin'!"

But Micky refused to be interested, beyond a derisive wiggling of his fingers at his nose, and West, having abstracted all the information possible, made no further effort. The knowledge thus obtained as to the present occupants of the cottage did not exactly coincide with the story Coolidge had told. He had spoken of a widow with three children in destitute circumstances following the father's death. The boy asserted there were no children in the family. And they had just moved in, within a very few days, during which time the neighbourhood had only glimpsed a "middling old" woman. It was strange at least, adding distinctly to the puzzle of the whole affair.

West grew nervous, wondering why the two should remain so long within, out of sight and hearing. If this was merely a charitable visit, it surely did not need require such a length of time. He had been waiting now for three-quarters of an hour. He opened the door of the car, and stepped out upon the curb, almost tempted to investigate the cause of delay. As he stood there undecided, the two emerged from the cottage, and descended the steps together. Through the opened door he caught no glimpse of any one within, yet some unseen hand closed it quickly behind them.

The words trembled from her lips, and were spoken slowly as though chosen with care. "The sad plight of the children particularly appealed to me."

"There are children then?" West questioned, as Coolidge assisted her into the car. The latter cast a swift glance of inquiry into the younger man's face.

"Children!" he exclaimed, "Of course; we spoke of them on the way down."

"I know; that was what made me wonder when one of the lads playing out here in the street said there were no kids in the cottage."

"Oh, I see," a bit sarcastically. "So you have been amusing yourself questioning the neighbours, have you?"

"To a very small extent," West confessed, keeping his temper. "One of the players chased a stray ball under the automobile, and I asked him a question or two. The cottage appeared so deserted, and you were absent for such a length of time, I became somewhat curious."

"And what did he tell you?"

"Only that the occupants had moved in within a few days, and that he had seen no kids about; no one in fact but a middling old woman."

"Did he mention any names?"

"No; I didn't ask. It was nothing to me."

"I should say it was not. So the kid told you there were no children, did he? Well, you heard what Natalie said just now—which are you going to believe?"

"The lady, of course," smilingly. "Surely this is no matter to quarrel over."

"No, Captain West," she broke in, leaning forward in the seat, and speaking again in the peculiar strained voice. "The boy was merely mistaken. He had not seen the children because they were kept closely in the house. They were turned out of their former home, and have absolutely nothing; no furniture even; only straw to sleep on. It was most pitiful."

"Do not think of it any longer, Natalie," Coolidge insisted rather gruffly. "They are all right now. I shall telephone for a doctor as soon as we get back, and attend to the rent the first thing tomorrow."

"I know, Uncle, but I cannot forget so easily. Do you know anything about poverty, Captain West?"

"Nothing very direct. Of course, in a way I have occasionally come in contact with suffering of that nature. I have been hungry enough in

the army, but usually I have experienced little need. I regret," he added apologetically, "that what I said was taken as criticism. I had no such meaning."

"Criticism!" Coolidge turned the car around as he spoke. "Be as free with that as you please; what I object to is your intruding at every opportunity. It looks as though you were trying to find out something—is that your game?"

"Not at all. I naturally spoke to the kid, and the only topic which occurred to me at the moment concerned the people you were visiting. I see no occasion for any misunderstanding."

"And there is none," she asserted cordially, her eyes meeting his own frankly. "So let's drop the subject, and enjoy our ride. I am not going to have the whole day spoiled because of these people. They are all right now. What is that big building over there?"

Coolidge emitted some answer, but devoted his attention to running the car, his jaw set. It was clear enough that West's explanation was not altogether satisfactory, and his dislike for the younger man had in no way lessened. The young woman, however, easily regained her vivacity, and devoted herself to making the ride homeward as pleasant as possible. West found her unu-

sually entertaining, with a deep sense of humor he had not before suspected, and an occasional lapse into slang which rather surprised him. He had previously entertained the thought that she was rather conventional and not particularly easy to approach, but this conception vanished quickly in a free flow of conversation, to which Coolidge apparently paid small attention. Indeed, there were moments when her extreme frankness of speech rather surprised West, even her voice striking strangely upon his ears, but the happy laugh, and swift glance of the eyes reassured him. No doubt she was playing a part for the benefit of Percival Coolidge in which he must co-operate. Later all would be explained, and made clear. This belief encouraged him to keep up his end of the conversation, ignoring Coolidge entirely, and devoting his attention exclusively to her.

The returning ride seemed very brief, and, almost before West realized it, the car whirled in through the Coolidge gate, and came to a stop at the door. Coolidge by this time had recovered from his spell of ill-nature, or else chose to so appear, and the party separated pleasantly. Natalie disappeared somewhere within, while the two men strolled out to the tennis court where the guests were enjoying a spirited game. All met

again at lunch, and then separated, some to motor over to the lake, the others amusing themselves as they saw fit. Both Coolidge and Natalie vanished, while West, finding himself alone, chose a book from the library, and, solaced by a cigar, sought a shady nook on the porch.

The book, however, was but a mark for his thoughts, which continually revolved about the strange surroundings in which he found himself. He was apparently making no progress, was no nearer a solution of the mystery confronting him. Thus far, at least, no direct clue had presented itself. Numerous things had occurred to strengthen suspicion, and to increase interest in the quest. But beyond this—nothing. He liked the girl and was completely enlisted in her service. He disliked Percival, and was convinced the fellow was planning evil. Several incidents had already strengthened this belief; yet there was nothing positive upon which to build; no path of adventure for him to follow. To speculate was easy enough, but real facts eluded him.

Yet, in spite of this feeling of failure, West's reflections centred more upon the young woman than upon the particular problem which he had to solve. The ride back from the city had revealed a phase of her character he had never observed

before—she had shown herself vivacious, light of speech, a bit slangy and audacious. He was not altogether sure that this new revealment quite pleased him, and yet it possessed a certain charm. He had before learned to think of her as rather quiet and reserved, and now must change his whole conception. It was difficult to adjust his mind at once to the different standard. He found himself wondering why she had afforded him glimpses of her nature so strangely unlike. What could have occurred within the cottage to thus make so suddenly manifest this new side to her character? The change in her only served to increase the mystery, and, he confessed, his admiration also. Her very freedom evidenced to his mind that he was really accepted, had been taken into a new intimacy; no longer to be held and treated as an interloper, a stranger employed for a purpose. She had deliberately cast aside the conventional, and become natural in his presence—free to speak and act as the spirit moved. This was a victory, and he chose to interpret it as proof that she already really liked and trusted him. Actuated by this feeling, she no longer deemed it necessary to dissemble in his presence. It was a long step in advance.

He had arrived at this very pleasant conclusion, when Sexton appeared in the door, evidently look-

ing for some one. The man espied him there in the shadow of the vines, and came forward.

"Miss Coolidge requests your presence, sir, for a few moments," he said gravely.

"Why, certainly; did she say where, Sexton?"

"In the library, sir; she is waiting there now."

West hesitated an instant. There was a question he was eager to ask, but immediately thought better of it. Interviewing servants was not in his line, and there were other ways of learning the truth.

"Very well," he said quietly. "I will join her at once. Thank you, Sexton," and disappeared into the cool, darkened hall.

CHAPTER IX

AN UNEXPECTED DISMISSAL

THE shades had been drawn closely to exclude the sun, and, for a moment after he first crossed the threshold of the library, West was unable to distinguish any occupant. He heard Sexton silently close the door behind him, but it was not until she moved slightly that he was able to perceive her presence directly across from where he stood. Her voice broke the silence.

"You will find a seat next to the window, Captain," she said quietly. "It was very good of you to come."

"The pleasure was mine," he replied. "Only I am blinded coming in here from the bright sunshine without."

"I have had a touch of headache—nervous, no doubt, from the visit this morning—and so ordered Sexton to draw the shades. Your eyes will soon accustom themselves to the lack of light. I see you quite well."

"Oh, I am all right now," and he sank into the vacant chair, facing her, expectantly. "You wished to speak with me, the servant said."

"Yes," she leaned back against the couch on which she rested, with face now clearly revealed, one hand nervously twirling a fan. "Although it is not easy for me to transform into words exactly what I mean. This is a very strange situation in which we find ourselves, Captain West."

"I have felt so," he admitted, surprised at this beginning. "Yet I must confess, I am now becoming quite reconciled."

She sat up suddenly, with eyes searching his face.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Perhaps I ought not to say," he answered boldly. "Yet circumstances seemingly justify frankness between us. I mean that I feel far more deeply interested in the final outcome of this affair today than I did yesterday—it means more to me."

"Indeed! Why?"

"Largely, I imagine, because I am privileged to know you much better. That naturally makes a difference."

"Does it indeed? You imply then an increased

interest in myself as an individual brings with it a greater desire to serve me?"

"Assuredly, yes."

"Then you render my task doubly hard," she said soberly, yet with a certain hardness in the tone. "I had not suspected any personal side whatever. You were a total stranger to me, Captain West, and I employed you in this matter merely in a business way, as—as—a detective. Surely you understood this clearly?"

"In a measure that is quite true," feeling the sharp sting of her words. "Yet the comparison is hardly fair, is it? I am not a detective in the sense with which you employ the term. No question of pay even has been discussed between us. The appeal to my services was from an entirely different stand-point. More, you even investigated rather carefully my social and financial standing before taking me into your confidence, or admitting me to your home. Is this not true?"

"Undoubtedly. I had reason to wish assurance in these matters. I had to present you to my friends."

"Yet this very knowledge of my social position placed me on a totally different plane from that of a detective picked up at some agency. You knew I was not serving you for pay."

"Did I?"

"I should hope you did," his voice hardening slightly.

"But for what other end did you volunteer your services?"

"Perhaps that is not so easily explained. It was a spirit of adventure which first led me to answer your advertisement, I presume. At least, I can give it no other name. Then, when we met, you appealed to me personally; I felt a desire to further our acquaintance and—well, your story aroused my interest."

"Is that all?"

"It might have been had not you chosen methods of procedure which led me to other thoughts."

She laughed.

"Oh, I see! All this has happened because I introduced you to the others as my fiancé. Why, that is positively funny. Didn't you know that was only a part of the game being played?"

"Yes," he said, ignoring the humour of it, and feeling oddly sober, "I understood, and was playing, the same as you. Only both of us, I think, forget an important fact."

"What, please?"

"That we were young, socially on a level, and

that you were an exceedingly charming young woman."

She laughed again, yet this time with more restraint.

"That is quite ridiculous, Captain West. Surely, you are not actually making love to me?"

"No, I am not. I am merely facing the situation very frankly. It would be useless for me to claim lack of interest in you. From our very first meeting, you have appealed to me strongly—more so than any other woman of my acquaintance. Then, perhaps, the peculiarity of our relationship, with the trust you seemed to impose in me, tended to deepen that interest. I confess I began to care for you—as a woman."

"Really you are quite flattering. I never dreamed I possessed such marvellous powers." She remained silent a moment, her eyes shaded by their long lashes; then uplifted them again to his face. "This makes it all the more necessary that I now speak plainly," she went on at length, "That I should explain to you it has all been a mistake. That was why I asked you to come here now?"

"All a mistake! Not the trouble you were in surely?"

"Yes. I must have dreamed most of it, I

think. I have just had a long confidential talk with Percival Coolidge, and we understand each other perfectly. Everything has been explained. So there is no necessity for our pretending any longer."

West rose to his feet, comprehending her full meaning, yet unwilling to yield his position without further explanation.

"Your words are certainly plain enough," he said slowly, "yet I trust I may be pardoned if I ask a question or so."

"Is it necessary?"

"Perhaps not, but I feel my curiosity is justified. You told me a rather remarkable story and requested my aid in the solving of a strange mystery. Now you abruptly dismiss me from that service. Do you mean the mystery is already solved without my further assistance?"

"I am convinced there was no mystery; that it was only imagination, Captain West. My calling you was a mistake."

"Percival Coolidge assures you of this?"

"Positively; we have discussed it from every angle, and all that appeared mysterious has been made clear."

"There is no one else impersonating you?"

"No."

"The checks at the bank; the strange person using your name; all these were myths?"

She laughed.

"Of course. I really believed all I said to you at the time, but everything has been explained since, and I realize how very foolish I have been. Uncle Percival has been very nice about it. He simply didn't understand before how worried I was."

"No doubt. You sent for me then merely to say I was dismissed?"

"Yes."

"And you told Coolidge, of course, how I came to be here?"

"Yes."

"And the others? What will they think?"

"Why, that can make no difference. They can be told that you were suddenly called away. Let them suppose we had a quarrel, and that our engagement is broken," and she laughed again, evidently vastly amused at the idea.

"But you, personally?" he insisted.

She sobered instantly, also rising, and facing him.

"Captain West, let us be sensible. I invited you here for a certain purpose. You were em-

ployed as much as any of my other servants. Is that a sufficient answer?"

"It certainly is. I will depart at once."

"Thank you. The limousine will be at the door. You will return to the Club, I presume?"

"Temporarily, until other arrangements are made."

He bowed and left her standing there in the shadows, the expression of her face veiled, but there seemed no response, no softening in the rigid attitude of her figure. She did not care; was only interested in his immediate departure. The change had occurred with such abruptness, West was unable as yet to realize its full significance, but, with no attempt to combat her decision, left the room, closing the door behind him. In that moment his mood changed. The dismissal had been so curt, his pride rose in rebellion. Finding Sexton in the front hall, he addressed him crisply.

"My bag will be ready in ten minutes."

"Yes, sir; you are going away, sir?"

"Immediately. A call to return to the city at once."

"I am very sorry, sir," he said respectfully, yet in a tone of such earnestness, as to cause West to glance toward him sharply. For an instant it was

upon the lips of the younger man to ask a question, but Sexton turned away, and it remained unasked. Promptly at the time mentioned came the servant's soft rap on the door.

"I came for the bag, sir."

West handed it over with a glance at the rather expressionless face.

"You said you regretted to see me leave, Sexton," he remarked jovially. "I presume you meant nothing in particular by that remark?"

"Oh, no, sir," standing motionless, bag in hand. "Only you have been very kind, sir, and—and—of course, it is none of my business, but I hope there is no quarrel, sir?"

"Quarrel! With Miss Natalie, you mean? Why should you suspect that?"

"I—I spoke, sir, very thoughtlessly, sir," he stammered. "You will pardon me, sir."

"Yes, but you must have had a reason, Sexton?"

"Only that she has seemed very much out of humour, sir, since her trip to town," he explained rather lamely. "I have never known her to be so hard to please, sir. I'm sure something is wrong, but that is no reason why I should say what I did, sir."

CHAPTER X

THE BODY OF A SUICIDE

AS the car whirled West down the circling drive-way, the only sign of life visible about the house was the motionless figure of Sexton on the steps. If either Miss Natalie, or Percival Coolidge, took interest enough in the proceedings to witness his departure, they chose to remain carefully concealed within. His glance searched the front of the mansion vainly; no window revealed an occupant. From behind where the guests were at play, sounded a distant murmur of voices, and laughter, but the house itself expressed only calm indifference. There was no pretence even at speeding the parting guest. He had simply been dismissed, turned out, decently enough, perhaps, considering his status, yet with a certain measure of contempt which rankled nevertheless.

The young man could not altogether reconcile this style of treatment with his preconceived conception of Miss Natalie Coolidge. He had been

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too deeply impressed by her to easily relinquish his previously formed opinion of her character. This latest action did not at all coincide with her former open friendliness. He had not gone to her as a servant, nor had she in any way treated him as such. What could account for so remarkable a change? Even if she had felt his present usefulness was ended; that she had made a mistake in ever admitting him to her confidence, the dismissal could have been much more pleasantly achieved. She could still have exhibited friendliness, and an interest in his departure. Her words and manner had been extremely abrupt, and her explanation far from satisfactory.

Perhaps it was the influence of Percival Coolidge which accounted for the sudden change in the girl. This explanation seemed probable. The man had in some way regained her confidence, and then, through trickery, had succeeded in poisoning her mind. There was no doubt he would do this, if possible, and the probability was that he had finally discovered a way. From the very first, West had felt the antagonism of the other; there had never been any love lost between them. Coolidge disliked him instinctively, and made no effort to conceal his feelings; he resented the intimacy between him and Natalie, naturally enough, and

would use every means possible to get the younger man completely out of the house. No doubt he looked upon him as dangerous. But why? There could only be one answer to this query. His own dishonesty; his secret knowledge of some trickery relative to the funds of the estate. He had convinced the girl of his honesty, but, more than ever, West believed the fellow a rascal. His very helplessness to intervene rendered him the more convinced.

These thoughts flitted through his mind, yet not consecutively, as the car left the grounds, and turned on to the main road, leading citywards. They were still skirting the Coolidge estate, although the house behind was concealed by shrubbery. The road descending into a ravine spanned by a concrete bridge, and a rather dense growth of trees shut out the surrounding landscape. Nothing moving was in sight. Suddenly, just as they cleared the bridge, and began to mount the opposite grade, there came a sharp report, sounding so close at hand the chauffeur clamped on his brake, and glanced anxiously over the side of the car.

"Blow-out, wasn't it, sir?"

"No," said West shortly, staring himself out into the thicket of trees at their left. "It was a shot

fired over there; a revolver I should say. Wait a second, Sanders, until I see what has happened."

It was largely curiosity which led him to leave the car. The very conviction that it was a revolver which had been discharged brought a desire to learn the cause of the shot. The sound of either a rifle or a shot-gun in that lonely spot would have been instantly dismissed as natural enough, but a pistol was different. That was no place for such a weapon. It somehow had a grimly sinister sound. Led forward by a dim path, he plunged down the sharp incline of the hill, and pressed his way through the thick fringe of trees beyond. Behind these ran a wire fence, guarding a stretch of meadow, the high, uncut grass waving in the wind. Nothing was in sight except this ripening field of clover sweeping upward to the summit of an encircling ridge. The silence was profound; the loneliness absolute.

It was this fact which startled West from curiosity into suspicion. Surely there had been a shot fired—a revolver shot—almost on the very spot where he stood. He could not doubt the evidence of his own ears. Yet who had fired? For what purpose? and how had the party disappeared so completely during that narrow margin of time? There was no place where a man could hide unless

he lay flat in the clover; and what occasion would any one have to thus seek concealment? Even if the shooter knew of the passing automobile, or heard his approach through the trees, there could be no reasonable cause for concealment. Determined now to learn exactly what had happened, West pressed his passage forward through the vines of the fence, and emerged into the field beyond. A half dozen yards and he found the clover trampled, as though a man had passed that way. The trail led into a shallow depression, past a rather large boulder, near which the trampling of the grass was even more plainly revealed, as though the stranger had remained here for some time, had even seated himself, and then, abruptly ended a few yards away. Evidently the fellow had turned back at this point, and retraced his steps.

West, now thoroughly puzzled, and already convinced that some mystery hovered over the place, began to circle through the untrampled clover, but without any defined purpose. All at once, at the lower end of the gully he came, unexpectedly, upon another trail, this one well marked, apparently frequently used, which led straight across the field, and terminated at a small gate leading through the wire fence. Evidently here was a short cut to the road, well known to the servants

on the estate, and possibly others. The discovery, however, told nothing further than this, and contenting himself with another glance about the unchanged field of rustling clover, West proceeded along the course of the path, intending to thus rejoin the automobile, waiting his return behind the trees.

Within a few steps of the gate, which was closed, he came to a sudden, horrified pause, staring ahead at a strange something huddled in the path. It was a shapeless thing, bearing no resemblance to a human being, until he advanced closer; then he recognized the form of a man, curled up as a dog sleeps, face down hidden by his arm, and limbs drawn up, as if in a sudden spasm of agony. A hat was in the path beyond, where it had fallen, and a revolver lay glittering in the sunlight a few feet away. There was nothing familiar about either figure or clothing, yet unquestionably there lay the body of a suicide. The single shot they had heard, the tell-tale revolver close to the dead man's hand, were clear evidence of what had occurred.

The unexpectedness of this discovery, the peculiar position of the dead man, the loneliness of that deserted field in which he lay, shocked West and, for a moment left him strangely hesitant. Who was the man? What could have led up to the

pitiful tragedy? Yet he advanced step by step nearer to the hideous object in the path. The man had been shot directly behind the right ear, killed instantly, no doubt, as the deadly bullet crashed through the brain. West lifted the arm which concealed the face, already shrinking from the suspicion, which had begun to assail him. Then he knew who the dead man was—Percival Coolidge.

CHAPTER XI

SUSPICION VERIFIED

AFFAIRS progressed far too rapidly for some hours for West to reflect seriously over this experience. He could only act swiftly, answer questions, and do all in his power to assist others. The real meaning of the tragedy he made no effort to solve; for the time being, at least, he must leave that to others.

He stood guard beside the body until servants came and bore it to the house, but made no effort to follow. Instead he gave his address to Sexton, and continued his journey into the city. After what had passed between them he had no desire to again encounter Miss Natalie; and under these circumstances, actually shrank from meeting her. Just what this man's death might mean to the girl he could not safely conjecture, yet deep down in his own heart, he felt convinced that this act of self-destruction would later prove to be a confession of guilt. Yet, be that as it may, he was already

definitely ruled out of the matter. Not, unless she personally sent for him, could he ever venture to go to her again in any capacity. To his mind this decision was final.

He was called for the inquest and gave his testimony. The hearing was brief, and the facts ascertained so clear, there remained no doubt in the minds of any one, but what this was a case of suicide. No particular attempt was made to probe into the cause, the personal affairs of the dead man being left for later investigation. West saw Natalie at the inquest for the very few moments she was upon the stand, but their eyes did not meet, nor did the girl give any evidence of recognition. She was pale, yet calm, answering the questions asked her quietly. These pertained entirely to her last meeting with Coolidge, and had no direct bearing on the verdict. The moment she was released she retired from the room; and West merely lingered long enough to learn the decision of the jury. Somehow the impression the young woman had left upon him in those few moments was not a pleasant one. He could not clearly analyse this result, yet she was either acting a part to conceal her true emotions, or else she was really indifferent.

It was not until the following day that reason began to reassert itself, and he succeeded in marshal-

ling the facts of the case more clearly in his own mind. He even began to doubt and question his own testimony, yet, before he reached any real conclusion, one of the Club servants approached his chair.

"Captain West, there is a man out here asking to see you."

"A man! Where?"

"I had him wait in the anteroom, sir. He would give no name, and seems to be of the working class; so I thought I better tell you first, sir."

"Very well, Mapes. I'll soon find out what he wants."

It was Sexton, twirling his hat nervously in his hands, and still standing irresolutely in the middle of the floor. As sight of West he took a hasty step forward, eager to explain the cause of his presence.

"You'll pardon me, sir," he burst forth in apology, "But I must see you, sir."

"That's quite all right, Sexton. You have some message?"

"Not—not from any one else, sir. It's just my own business, but—but I thought you would help me, sir."

"Certainly; only too glad. Let's step in here where we can talk quietly."

He pointed the way into a private card room, closing the door behind his visitor.

"Take the seat over there, Sexton. You came in to see me from Fairlawn?"

"No, sir, I didn't. The fact is, I'm not out there any longer."

"Not there! What do you mean?"

"I've been discharged, sir, with two other servants, since the funeral yesterday."

"Discharged! Why I understood you had been employed there for years."

"Several years, sir."

"And now discharged! By whom? not Miss Natalie surely?"

"Yes, sir. She didn't give no reason; just said we were not wanted any longer. That's one reason why I came here to see you, sir."

"But I hardly know how I can be of help. I have no house of my own, and—well, the truth of the matter is, Sexton, just at present I am not on very good terms with the young lady myself."

"I know that, sir," more confidently, "And it isn't a position I am seeking, at all. I have quite a tidy bit of money laid away, and could get plenty of work. That's not the point, sir. Why should Miss Natalie tell me to go like that? It isn't a bit like her, sir; she ain't seemed natural at

all lately, and I tell you there's something wrong goin' on out there. I'm sure o' that, sir."

"Sure of what?"

"Well, for one thing, it's my opinion that Percival Coolidge never killed himself, sir."

West sat up stiffly, as though struck a blow. These words startled him; drove his own mind into sudden activity.

"What makes you think that, Sexton?" he questioned slowly.

"Well, there's more than one thing," as though glad to have made the plunge, and anxious to justify himself. "But first of all that wasn't his revolver they found lying beside him. He always had one in his valise, an' it's there now, or was when I looked to see."

"You didn't tell that to the coroner."

"No, sir; he never put me on the stand. Besides I didn't know about it then. After I thought about it, I told Miss Natalie, sir."

"Oh, you did! and what did she say?"

"She didn't think that proved anything; that he probably had the other in his pocket."

"This was before you were dismissed?"

"Yes, sir; the evening before, sir."

West whistled gravely, his gaze on the other's face.

"And is that all, Sexton?" he asked finally. "Is there any other reason why you doubt Coolidge killed himself?"

"Did you notice where he was shot, sir?"

"Behind the right ear; the wound was plainly visible."

"Not very easy for a man to do himself, sir."

"No, but possible, nevertheless. The coroner was satisfied on that point."

"Yes, sir, but the coroner overlooked one thing, sir. He was sure it was a suicide case, and wanted to get done with it in a hurry. I and Simmons, sir, washed the body to get it ready for burial, an' I combed the hair down over the bullet wound. There wasn't no powder marks on the skin, an' not a hair was singed, sir. That's what makes me say he never killed himself."

West sat silent and motionless, looking straight at the man opposite, endeavouring to decide on a course of action. Someway in the depth of his earnestness, Sexton no longer appeared a servant. He was a man, voicing a man's heart. West realized the change instinctively; here was an intelligent loyal fellow, to be met frankly, and for the time being, at least, on the ground of equality. It would be useless to try to either mislead, or deceive.

"Sexton," he began finally, "this is a pretty serious charge you make, my man, but since I have been thinking things over, I confess some suspicious circumstances have arisen in my own mind. Of course I was not aware of these facts you have just related, but they fit in nicely with some observations of my own. The truth is," he confessed frankly, "I did not tell all I knew to the coroner's jury. I meant to do so, but the right questions were not asked me, and certain details slipped my memory until too late. Do you recall a boulder of rock out in that clover field?"

"Yes, sir, to the right of the path; it is mostly hidden now by the growth."

"Entirely concealed a few yards away. Well, when I crawled through the fence after hearing that shot fired, I saw nothing, and heard nothing. I had advanced into the field several rods when I came upon the trail of some one leading directly north. It was not a path; merely evidence that a single person had passed that way. I followed, and came to this boulder. Here there was every proof visible that the previous party had remained for some time, seated and lying on the ground under protection of the stone. The occupancy was a recent one. Then evidently, whoever it was, had advanced to the right in the general direction of the

gate through the fence, near where Coolidge's body was found. The marks of advance did not lead that far, or even to the marked path through the field. They ended on a little rise, some ten yards from the boulder, where the fellow apparently turned about, and retraced his steps."

"How far was that from the gate into the road, sir?" he asked breathlessly.

"Within easy shooting distance for a revolver of that calibre, I should say. Any good marksman could have rung the bell."

"And you saw no one?"

"No; not a sign; the fact is I failed at the time to put two and two together. The thought of a possible murder never occurred to me. It was only afterwards that I began to appreciate what all this might mean, and now what you have said has driven it home."

"You think it was murder then, sir?"

"Yes, I do," replied West gravely. "It has all the marks, but who committed the crime? What was the motive? It will never do for us to make such a charge, after the coroner's verdict, without positive proof."

"No, sir."

"And you know of nothing which might clear this up?"

"No, sir; I've been with the Coolidges, sir, ever since Miss Natalie was a little girl, and I ain't heard of any trouble that ought to end in murder, sir."

"How old was Miss Coolidge when her father died?"

"She must have been seventeen, sir."

"And since then Percival Coolidge had full charge of the estate?"

"Practically, yes, sir; there was another trustee, but he died; and then, as I understand, Miss Natalie had some funds of her own."

West took a cigar from his pocket, and lit it. Although not altogether clear in his own mind, he had begun to see light. For a moment he smoked in silence in an endeavour to figure out his own duty, while Sexton, nervously clinching and unclinching his hands, watched and waited.

CHAPTER XII

AGAINST A STONE WALL

WAS this discovery anything to him? What difference could it make whether Percival Coolidge had died by his own hand, or been treacherously shot from ambush? How would it benefit Natalie Coolidge to have the truth revealed? And, if it would benefit her, why should he devote his time and labour to such an effort? She had cast him off, thrown him aside; her affairs had no further interest for him. Let her lawyer take care of them. These were West's first thoughts.

All true, yet this state of mind brought no satisfaction. He was interested; he could not escape his first impressions of the girl, or drive from him a desire to serve her, whether she wished it, or not. She might, indeed, be in equal danger from an assassin. He could not determine this until he learned the cause of the slaying of Percival. Then, on the other hand, suppose some one else's

suspicions were also aroused. Who would they naturally look to as guilty of this horrible crime? There was but one answer—Natalie Coolidge. She was seemingly the only person to directly benefit by this sudden death. All these considerations urged him on, overcame his doubt and indecision. Then he desired to learn the truth himself. His eyes rested on Sexton's anxious face.

"I've been thinking it over," he admitted quietly, "and I guess it is up to you and me to find out what this means."

"Yes, sir," hesitatingly. "You—you don't think it was Miss Natalie, sir?"

"No, I do not, Sexton. I have my own reasons for saying that. Yet naturally she is the one to be first suspected. Do you know anything?"

"Only that I am sure she was in the garden, sir, when the shot was fired. I saw her there just after you drove away."

"That is conclusive then, so far as her personal actions are concerned. But there is an odd angle to this matter, and I might as well explain it to you first as last. Perhaps you can help figure the oddness out. I was not engaged to Miss Natalie, Sexton; I was not even a friend. I came to the house, employed to perform a certain task. She introduced me as her fiancé merely to explain

my presence there, and make the way clear. It was the impulse of a moment."

"You don't say, sir! What, may I ask, was it you was expected to do?"

"To discover who was masquerading in this city under her name."

"Was there some one, sir?"

"So she told me; we went into that rather thoroughly. She claimed it had been going on for some months; checks had been cashed at the bank; even her servants had been approached by some one so closely resembling her as to deceive them; and she had been reported at various places she never visited. She was very much exercised over it."

"And she engaged you just to find this other woman?"

"Yes; her lawyer and Percival Coolidge only laughed at her story."

"But you believed it, sir?"

"Well, perhaps not at first altogether. It seemed too strange and impossible. I thought something must have got on her nerves and caused her to imagine things. But the first night I remained out there gave me a shock. I do not know whether I left my door unlocked, or whether a pass-key was used, but I woke up suddenly to discover a woman

in the room. I only had a glimpse of her, for she slipped out instantly, and disappeared down the hall; but it was moonlight and I would have sworn the intruder was Miss Natalie. I asked her the next day?"

"And she denied being there?"

"Absolutely, and convinced me it was true. There is no doubt in my mind, Sexton, but what she really is being impersonated by some one who resembles her most remarkably. Who this person is I have not the remotest idea; nor what her real object can be. Just at this moment, I am inclined to believe it has something to do with the Coolidge estate—a criminal scheme of some kind, and that Percival Coolidge had connection with it."

"I can hardly believe that, sir."

"No doubt you find it difficult. You told me yourself that had always been his room, the one I occupied."

"Yes, sir."

"That woman knew it; she came there to consult with him." He stopped suddenly. "By Gad! Sexton, maybe she came there to kill him. I hadn't thought of that."

"It is too much for me, sir," the other said soberly. "I don't know why any one should want to kill him. But there's got to be a reason some-

where. Where was it the three of you went on Sunday in the runabout, Captain West?"

"To a house over in the factory district; some charity case that Coolidge was interested in—the widow of one of his employees, I believe."

"Did you see the people?"

"No, I didn't go in; waited outside in the car; it was no affair of mine. Why?" he asked in surprise.

"Because, sir, Miss Natalie seemed like a different person when she got back. Not in looks, or nothing like that I don't mean, but in the way she talked and acted. Nothing suited her all the rest of the day. You know how she was to you, sir. Well she was just that snappy with all of us, even after we brought the body back to the house. And she wouldn't look at him, sir, not even after he was dressed proper and laid out. She just went off up stairs, and stayed there; had a bit of toast an' tea, an' that's all."

"I hardly believe," said West thoughtfully, "you can attribute her state of mind to anything that occurred on that trip. Indeed she was in high spirits all the way home."

"I can't help that, sir," Sexton insisted blindly. "It was something that happened yesterday what set her wrong, an' if I was you, sir, I'd find out

what happened in that house first of all. Could you find the place?"

"Yes, I think so. I'll look it up, although I don't have much faith in your theory." He glanced at his watch. "I'll go out there now. You come back here about five, and we will talk over any discoveries I may make."

"And what shall I do, sir?"

Both were standing, West with hand on the knob of the door. The light in his eyes hardened.

"Nothing occurs to me now, Sexton, unless you can find an excuse to return to Fairlawn, after something you have forgotten, let us say. If we can learn what Miss Natalie proposes doing it might furnish a clue."

"Very well, sir, and I am to be here at five o'clock?"

"Yes, at five; I will leave word with the doorman to show you in at once."

West picked up a taxi-cab for the trip, bidding the chaffeur to drive to a certain section of the city, and then up and down the various streets until told to stop. He had no idea that his quest would reveal anything of importance relative to the death of Coolidge, yet no better suggestion occurred to him and he felt that he must do some-

thing. His conversation with Sexton had greatly strengthened his conviction that this was a murder, and he had determined to ferret out the truth if possible. Yet, thus far there was nothing to build upon, no clue, no motive, no suspicion as to who had perpetrated the deed. He simply faced a blank wall, in which no entrance was apparent, yet there must be one, if he was only fortunate enough to stumble upon it. Deep down in his heart West was conscious that he possessed a motive in this search far more worthy than mere curiosity. That motive was Natalie Coolidge. He smiled at the thought, yet confessed it true. In spite of her curt dismissal, his memory of the girl centred about those earlier hours of their acquaintance. Something mysterious had occurred to make her change so quickly, and he was unwilling to condemn her before learning the real reason. This murder must have some relation to the Coolidge estate; he could conceive of no other motive for such a cold-blooded affair; and hence its solving must prove of vital importance to her and her future. Now, when the verdict of the coroner's jury had been suicide, and when only he, and the servant Sexton suspected otherwise, it was of the utmost importance that they endeavour to

unravel the crime. For her sake he could do no less, thus serving and protecting her to the best of his ability.

The chauffeur drove slowly up and down obscure streets for half an hour before West recognized familiar surroundings, and motioned for him to draw up against the curb. He had discovered the place sought, but from the street it exhibited no signs of occupancy, nor did any knocking at the front door bring response from within. He circled the building, finding an uncurtained window at the rear, which merely revealed an unfurnished room. Every door was locked, but, as he passed along the other side to regain the taxi, a man emerged from the next house, and hailed him.

"Say, what're yer snoopin' round there for? Lookin' for somebody?"

"Yes, the parties who were here Sunday. What's become of them."

"Hobart, you mean?"

"Is that his name? I met him down town, and he told me to come here," West explained rapidly. "We had a deal on."

"Oh, yer did, hey," leaning his arms on the fence. "Well, Jim Hobart was the name he giv'

me. That's my house, which is why I happen to know what his name was. Something queer about that fellar, I reckon, but 'tain't none o' my business. You ain't a detective, or nothin' like that, are yer?"

"Nothing at all like that," West laughed, although interested. "Why? Did you think the police might be after him?"

"Not for enything I know about, only he skipped out mighty sudden. Paid me a month rent, and only stayed there three days. That looks sorter queer. Then Sunday that fellar what committed suicide out south—I read about in the papers—came to see him in a car. I got a boy workin' in his factory; that's how I come to know who the guy was. The next night Hobart, an' them with him, just naturally skipped out. So I didn't know but what the police might want him for something."

"I don't know anything about that. I just called on a private matter. Where did he go to?"

"Hell, man, I didn't even know he was goin'."

"Who did he have with him here—a family?"

"A woman 'bout his age I should say, an' a younger one. I didn't see 'em only from the window; didn't get no sight o' the girl's face at

all, but could tell the way she walked she was young. They didn't have nothin' with 'em; that's all my stuff in the house there."

Feeling the uselessness of trying to learn anything more, West thanked him, and returned to the taxi.

"Back to the Club," he ordered briefly, and settled into his seat to think.

CHAPTER XIII

238 WRAY STREET

THE information thus gained had been small enough, yet sufficient to stimulate his belief that he was at least upon the right trail. The sudden departure of this man Hobart, and the fact that no young children were in the family, were important items to consider. Coolidge then had not visited this cottage to aid a widow and orphans. There had been some other object in his call. The girl must have known and understood the real purpose; that was why they both acquiesced so readily to his remaining outside in the car. It was part of their mutual plan to thus leave him in ignorance. Yet they had made a mistake in taking him along at all. This error alone gave him now an opportunity to unravel the riddle. But did it? What did he know? Merely that Coolidge had not gone to this house on an errand of charity; that the occupant called himself, temporarily, perhaps, Jim Hobart; that his family con-

sisted of two women, undescribed except as to age; and that all three had mysteriously disappeared together. He might take it for granted that this disappearance was caused by the death of Coolidge, but, they had left no trail, no inkling as to where they had gone. He might suspect this sudden vanishing had direct connection with the crime he was endeavouring to solve, but he possessed absolutely no proof, and, apparently, any further movement on his part was completely blocked.

More puzzled than ever, although now fully convinced that murder had been committed, West could do nothing but wait the reappearance of Sexton. The latter arrived promptly on time, but, much to West's disappointment, merely nodded his head negatively to the general inquiry as to whether or not he had made any discoveries. The early hour enabled the host to secure a secluded table in the dining room, but there was no effort at conversation until after the meal had been ordered. Then West told his story. The retelling of these incidents of the afternoon, coupled with Sexton's evident interest in the narrative, and the questions the man asked, caused the discoveries made to assume a greater importance than before. His listener seemed to sense the situation clearly.

"It wasn't no mistake, your goin' out there, sir," he said, confidently. "What we know now gives us something to work on anyhow, an' it's just what I thought—that trip Sunday led up to this killin', an' something happened while they was in there to stir Miss Natalie all up. Now we got to find this fellow—what did you say his name was, sir?"

"Hobart—Jim Hobart; that is he was known by that name there."

"And you say he has simply dropped out o' sight?"

"That's true; never left a clue behind him."

"Well, sir, I'm not quite so sure about that. You listen to me, sir. I walked out to Fairlawn from the car-line, an' come in across the fields to the house. I didn't have no good excuse for goin' back there, sir, an' was sorter afraid to meet up with Miss Natalie. She might have thought I was just spyin' 'round. But I didn't have no need for being afraid, for it seems she'd driven into town about noon, an' hadn't got back. There wasn't nobody but the servant around the place, sir. Do you remember Lizzie, the second maid—sorter full face, an' light hair?"

West nodded, wondering what all this might be leading to.

"Well, she an' I always hit it off together, an' I

talked with her quite a bit. She's goin' to quit too, because of something what happened, so it was safe enough to question her. She told me, sir, that Miss Natalie had a telephone call this morning that took her into the city. Lizzie she went to the 'phone when it rang, an' it was a man's voice. He wouldn't leave no message, but insisted on speaking to Miss Natalie. Lizzie had to call her down from upstairs."

"Did the girl overhear the conversation?"

"Not so as to make very much out of it, sir. She was sorter interested, the man's voice being strange, and hung around in the hall listening, but about all she could make out was what Miss Natalie said. It seemed like he was givin' her some kind of address, which she didn't exactly understand, an' so she repeated it after him two or three times to be sure."

"What was the address?"

"238 Ray Street, sir."

"You are certain of that?"

"That was what Lizzie said; she was pretty positive, sir; an' then about an hour later, Miss Natalie ordered her car, an' drove into town."

"Alone?"

"Yes, sir; it was the electric she took."

West remained silent, tapping with his knife on

the table. This might prove important, and he could not afford to ignore the information. While to his mind it was hardly likely Hobart had called the girl, yet the possibility remained.

"I never heard of a Ray Street," he said at length, "but of course, there may be one. Oh, Charlie," he stopped a waiter passing. "Bring me up a City directory, will you. You will find one in the office down stairs. Tell the Secretary Captain West wishes it and will return it at once."

The first course had been served when the man returned with the book, placing it on a chair next West, who immediately deserted his soup to inspect the volume.

"Ray Street," he said doubtfully, fingering the pages. "There is no such street here, Sexton. Are you sure you got that right?"

"That's what she said, sir; I made her say it over twice."

"Ray Street; wonder if it could be spelled with a W? By Jove, it is—Wray! Here we have it, only five blocks long, extending from Conway to Grogan. Rather tough section I should judge."

"I don't know, sir. I never heard of any of those streets before. How do you get there?"

"By car you mean? Well, let's see on the map. Oh yes, that's plain enough; Milwaukee Avenue to

Gans, and then walk east three blocks. It wouldn't do any harm to take a look around there either. Perhaps that is where Hobart went; he might have been the one calling Natalie. Rather a wild guess, but it will give us something to do. What number was it?"

"238, sir."

"Good; we'll try our luck after we finish dinner; there will be a couple of hours of daylight yet. Are you game, Sexton?"

"Quite so, sir."

The sinking sun was still above the sky-line of the buildings fronting on Milwaukee Avenue, when the two men alighted at the intersection of Gans Street. West hardly took the adventure seriously, being more influenced by curiosity than any other motive, but Sexton was deeply in earnest, in full faith they were upon the right trail. Doubtful as he was, West had neglected no precautions. The map assured him that they were invading a disorderly section of the city, where to be well-dressed would only invite suspicion, and might lead to trouble. To avoid this possibility, he had donned his most shabby suit, and wore a cap largely concealing his face. In one pocket of his jacket within easy reach lay hidden his service revolver loaded, and he had induced Sexton

to accept a smaller weapon in case of emergency.

Gans Street was not inviting, the saloon on the corner being flanked by several small factories. The brick side-walk was in bad condition, and littered with junk of all kinds, while the road-way was entirely uncared for, and deeply rutted from heavy traffic. Half way down the block, was a tannery, closed now for the night, but with its odour yet permeating the entire atmosphere. Altogether, the scene was desolate and disagreeable enough, but the street was deserted of pedestrians, the factory doors tightly closed for the night.

The two men pressed their way through along the narrow passage, finding less obstruction as they advanced, the second block being composed entirely of houses, largely of the tenement type, and apparently principally populated by children. Wray Street, once attained, was of an entirely different character, being lined with homes, usually humble enough outwardly, yet the throughfare was clean, and the small yards had generally an appearance of neatness in marked contrast to its surroundings. 238 was a three story brick, on the corner, the second story evidently utilized for living purposes, and the ground floor occupied as a saloon. The upper story exhibited no signs of occupancy, the windows unwashed, and two of them

boarded up. The saloon possessed a fairly respectable appearance, the lettering across the front window proclaiming it as "Mike's Place," and seemed to be doing some business, several entering and departing by way of its hospitable door, while the two lingered in uncertainty opposite. Standing there idly however did not appeal to West.

"Well, let's go over," he said impatiently. "There is nothing to be learned here."

It was an ordinary bar-room, and their entrance apparently aroused no special interest. Besides the man behind the bar, a rather rough looking foreigner, a Pole in West's judgment, three customers were in the place, two with feet upon the rail talking with the drink dispenser, and, one at a small table moodily contemplating a half emptied stein of beer. There were three other tables in the room, and the Captain with a swift glance about, drew out a chair and sat down, his action being imitated by Sexton. The bar-tender came forward around the end of the bar, while the man nearest shifted his position slightly so as to look them over, conversation instantly ceasing. Something indefinable in the fellow's attitude, and steady stare, gave West a feeling of hostility, which was

not dispelled by the gruff greeting of the bartender.

"Well, what is it you fellers want?"

"A stein apiece, and a sandwich—you serve them, don't you?"

"Sure; ham or beef?"

"Ham."

There was no cordiality, no welcome in either manner or speech. It was plainly evident the proprietor of the saloon felt no enthusiasm over his unknown customers. The eyes of the two men met understandingly, but the few words exchanged between them were entirely foreign to the situation. Mike came back with the beer and sandwiches, pausing this time to wipe off the table, as an excuse for speech.

"You guys live 'round here?" he asked gruffly, "Don't remember ever seein' yer in here before."

"No," returned West indifferently, looking directly into the hard face. "I'm a smoke inspector, an' we just dropped in on our way back to the office. Why?"

"Oh, nuthin'; only we don't get much trade outside the neighbourhood. I wish ter hell ye'd get after that tannery; can't hardly breathe here sometimes."

"That's what we were looking after; had some complaints lately."

"Sure, I been kickin' 'bout it for a month. You fellers have another beer on me."

He walked back toward the bar, pausing an instant to whisper a word to the taller man who still stood there staring moodily at the table. What he said apparently determined action, for the fellow addressed, crossed the room to where West and Sexton sat, deliberately pulled up a vacant chair, and joined them.

"Bring me another, Mike," he ordered. "That is, if these gents don't object to my joining 'em awhile."

CHAPTER XIV

TRAPPED

WEST smiled pleasantly, glad the man had taken the initiative, thus naturally opening up a way for asking certain questions. Whatever his own immediate object might be in thus scraping an acquaintance made no difference. It would doubtless develop in time, but meanwhile here was the opportunity sought to discuss the affairs of the neighbourhood. Yet the subject must be approached with due caution. The very indifference of the bar-tender coupled with the evident desire of this hanger-on to form an acquaintance, served to reveal the real nature of "Mike's Place." Plainly enough strangers were viewed with suspicion, and this was no ordinary saloon, catering to whatever trade drifted within its doors. More than likely it was rather a thieves' hang-out, ever suspicious of the activity of the police.

Yet this fellow bore no outward semblance to the common conception of the under-world. Nor

did his actions or words exhibit any motive other than ordinary good-fellowship. He was well dressed, easy of manner, with an exceptionally intelligent face, blue eyes meeting West's gaze frankly, a carefully trimmed moustache, with white teeth good humouredly showing when he smiled, and threads of grey in his hair. His very appearance invited confidence and comradeship, while his outspoken words increased this impression.

"Excuse my butting in," he explained genially. "But it's damn dull around here tonight. Nobody to talk with but a couple o' bums. You see I don't belong around here; just dropped in for a bit of business with Mike."

"I see," admitted West, puzzled, and wondering how far he dared venture. "You can get lonelier in a big city than anywhere else."

"You bet you can. I like some one I can talk to; some guy with ideas. You see I run a broker's office down town, an' its pretty blame slow around a dump like this—you get me?"

"Sure; this seems to be a pretty quiet place."

"Quiet! Hell! it isn't always so quiet. I've dropped in here when it was lively enough, believe me. But tonight it's the limit. Fact is I come up

for a little excitement, as much as anything else, but must have struck an off night. You're a smoke inspector, Mike says?"

West nodded.

"Know Fred Karvan, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes; friend of yours?"

"Used to be; we were kids together down on the southside. He's got a pretty soft job now; stands in strong with the City Hall, they tell me. Mean to drop in and see him some of these days."

"You'll find him a mighty good fellow," asserted West to whom the name was entirely unfamiliar.

"Well, I'm not so sure about that. He's got pretty stiff the last few years they tell me. But then you work under him, and ought to know. Head of your department, isn't he?"

"Yes, but I only meet him in a business way, of course."

"Sure; but that is the way you get to know them best. Been a soldier, haven't you?"

"Yes, but what made you think that?" in some surprise at the unexpected query. The man laughed, lighting a cigar carelessly.

"Oh, it has not been so long since, that the evidence is obliterated. I've got a habit of noticing

things. The way you sit, and square your shoulders told me you'd been in uniform; besides you're the right age. Get across to France?"

"Had over a year there," wondering what the fellow could be angling after. "You didn't get in?"

"No; I was over the limit. I was thinking you might be interested in looking over a collection of war relics Mike has got stowed away here somewhere. He had two boys over there, and I reckon they must have put in most of their time gathering up souvenirs. Anyhow they brought back the greatest collection of war junk I've ever seen. Say, Mike, what did you do with those war relics the boys sent home?"

The fellow addressed leaned over the bar, his face glowing with sudden interest.

"They vas in the back-room, all spread out. Why you ask? The gentlemen would see them, what?"

"Yes; this one was a soldier himself. Maybe he can tell more about them than the boys could. How is it? You fellows like to see the things?"

West hesitated for just an instant, his eyes turning unconsciously toward Sexton, who had not spoken. He felt no suspicion, merely a vague doubt as to what this invitation might conceal.

Yet it had all been natural enough, and promised an opportunity for him to learn something more of the place. An accident might reveal the very discovery he was eagerly seeking. Besides there could be no danger; both he and Sexton were armed, and apparently the invitation was innocently extended. To refuse to accept would be churlish.

"Certainly," he said at last, quaffing the last of his beer and rising to his feet. "It will be nothing new to me, I imagine, but we'll have a look."

The other man, who had been leaning against the bar, had disappeared, while the fellow at the table had seemingly fallen asleep. Mike came forward with a bunch of keys in his hand.

"I keep dot room locked," he exclaimed gruffly, "for some beoples run off with all dings they get their fingers on. Hey, you, Carl," and he roughly shook the sleeper into semi-consciousness, "wake up, and see to the bar awhile. I've got some business. Whoever comes, you keep them here—understand. All right, gents."

The three stood close behind him as Mike inserted the key, and opened the door. It was already growing dusk without, and the tightly closed room, with shade drawn at the single window, was so dark that West could scarcely discern its shape

and contents. Mike, without hesitation, stepped within, his great bulk blotting out whatever view there was.

"Come right in, gents," he insisted. "Von minute, an' I turn on the light."

West never understood why he responded so recklessly to this invitation, and advanced without hesitation. He had no suspicion of any trick, no conception of being in any danger. He stepped in directly behind the leader, and Sexton followed. An instant later, the door closed, with the sharp click of a night latch, and Mike flashed on the light. As he did so, he wheeled about, and shot one mighty clinched fist straight into West's face. This was done so suddenly, so unexpectedly, the man attacked found no opportunity to even throw up a hand in self-defence. The giant Pole flung his whole weight into the crashing blow, and the ex-soldier went down as though struck by a pole-ax. For an instant, he realized that Sexton was in a fierce struggle; that his assailant stood poised above him ready to land again if he moved; then consciousness left him entirely.

He woke up, sitting in a chair, his hands bound to the arms with strips of cloth. For a moment everything about seemed tinged with yellow, the various objects in sight vague and shapeless. It

hurt him to move his head, and his mind functioned dully. He could not think, or bring back to memory a recollection of what had occurred. Yet slowly the mist cleared and the objects about him assumed natural form. He was in a room of some size—not the one in which he had been attacked he felt sure—fitted up with a long table, and a number of chairs. There was no other furniture; the walls were bare, and only a small rag rug partially covered the floor. At first he perceived no other occupants; only as, painfully, he finally twisted his head to the right, his eyes distinguished two men seated against the wall. The sight of their faces restored instantly his memory of what had occurred. The Pole rested back, with feet on the table and eyes closed, but the other—the younger man—was watching him closely, an unlighted cigar gripped in his teeth.

"So, you've come out of it," the latter said unpleasantly. "I'd begun to think Mike had handed you a real knock-out that time. Ready to answer a few questions?"

West, his brain clearing rapidly, sat up straighter in the chair, determined to play out his part the best he could.

"Perfectly ready," he replied struggling to con-

trol his voice. "Only I should like to know what all this means? Why attack me?"

"You'll find that out soon enough, Captain; but first I'll do the questioning."

"Not until I know one thing, at least—what has become of the man who was with me?"

"Well, I might as well tell you," carelessly. "He got hurt; the fool compelled me to hit him with a gat; so he's out of it, and you might as well come through clean—that guy isn't going to help you any."

"You mean you killed him?"

"Well, he's out of the game; that's enough. And as for you, your best play right now is to talk up straight." He laughed sneeringly, "Unless you want to call up your friend Karvan, at the City Hall, you know. Hell, but you was easy!"

"Easy?"

"That's what I said. I knew you all right when you first blew in, only I wasn't quite sure. Just had a glimpse of you once before. I naturally guessed your smoke-inspector stunt was a sham. So, I ran that Fred Karvan stuff in on you. You ate it up, which gave you clean away, for I never knew any guy of that name. Do you see the point, Captain West?"

"Yes, I see all that plainly enough, but it does

not explain the attack on me. You evidently know my name, and this assault has been deliberately made. Why? What have you against me? I have never seen either of you before.

"Perhaps I'll tell you when you explain. What brought you into this neighbourhood. Hunting some one, wasn't you?"

"Not exactly."

"Oh, don't lie; that will bring you nothing, West. You were sticking your nose into a private matter which does not concern you in any way. That's right, isn't it? Very well, you've had your lesson, and now it is simply up to you to either drop this thing, or else take another. It's up to you how far we go. Now listen. I believe it was merely curiosity that brought you here. That's true, isn't it?"

"Largely, yes."

"You suspected something, and wanted to find out if it was so. Well, you came into a bad neighbourhood. We are not nice to your kind around here. What really caused your seeking me?"

"I do not know that I did," West answered honestly. "In fact I haven't the slightest idea who you are."

The other laughed.

"So you are as green as that. Then I'll give you the information. My name is Hobart, Jim Hobart. I am the guy you were looking for?"

"Yes," West admitted, seeing no reason to refuse an answer.

"I thought so, although darned if I know how you ever located me here. However, the sooner we come to some understanding, the better. What do you know about me?"

"Nothing."

"Is that so! You knew my name when I spoke it. It was the Coolidge matter that sent you hunting me. Oh, hell, you might as well cough up, West, for I've got your number. You thought the girl was here, didn't you?"

"I had reason to believe she came here."

"I see; how did you gain that news?"

"A conversation by telephone was overheard."

"Now we are getting down to facts. And this comprises your entire information, doesn't it? Let's check up. You connected me with the case because you were with the uncle and her on their call Sunday. You discovered in some way that I had since disappeared from that neighbourhood. Then you accidentally got on to this telephone call, and decided to run me down. Some cute little detective, I'll say. But what's the object? What

is it you are trying to connect me up with? What possible cause can you have for butting in on this affair?"

"I told you before; merely curiosity."

"And who was the guy with you?"

"An old servant of the Coolidge family."

"It was mere curiosity in his case also, I presume?"

"So far as I know, yes."

Hobart smiled, showing his teeth cruelly.

"West," he said slowly, "you are a damned good liar, but I am about to spike your gun. Go on out Mike, and send in the first witness."

CHAPTER XV

THE EDGE OF COMPROMISE

THE two men sat silently watching each other, Hobart pretending a carelessness he was far from feeling, uncertain as to West's real purpose. The latter realized now the true seriousness of his position, yet this only increased his belief in the reality of the crime. Previously his mind had harboured doubts, but the very fact that Hobart would resort to such desperate methods was ample proof of his apprehension of danger. If Percival Coolidge had committed suicide, this fellow would surely have nothing to fear; he could safely ignore any efforts to trap him; indeed would possess no suspicions along that line. It was his own guilty conscience which drove him to desperation. Coolidge had been murdered, and this man was either guilty of the crime, or else knew the one who was, and had personal reasons for protecting the party.

These thoughts took possession of his mind and were convincing. He no longer questioned but

what he was on the track of crime, yet his thought at that moment concentrated more vividly on his own personal peril. How could he escape? What was he about to be confronted with? Nothing around him afforded inspiration. He was bound helplessly; Sexton had disappeared, whether dead or a prisoner, he did not know; the walls of the room exhibited no signs of weakness, while Hobart eyed his every movement coldly, evidently enjoying his predicament. Apparently the man comprehended the nature of his thought.

"Perfectly useless, West," he said carelessly. "This place was constructed for the purpose, and you are not the only one who has tested its strength. You will get out when I say so, and not before."

"Do you intend to say so?"

"Well, that depends," shrewdly. "Not if your release means my taking any chances. But frankly, I do not believe it will. So far as I can see you possess no particular interest in this matter—only the attraction a young fellow always feels in a pretty woman. Have I got that doped out right?"

"To an extent at least."

"Yes, to a very large extent. Of course, curiosity also played a part, while everybody possesses

a sneaking desire to do a detective act. Miss Coolidge filled you up with a lot of bunk; she was good looking, and you fell for it. Certain things happened that you failed to understand, so you rather naturally jumped to the conclusion that some crime was being concocted. That was what brought you here. Now I take it that, ordinarily, you are a man of some sense. Consequently I mean to try to get you to drop the whole affair, as being none of your business. If you agree to this, I accept your pledge, the door opens, and you go free; otherwise—" he waved his hand expressively.

"Otherwise what?" asked West quietly.

"I will see that you are removed from all temptation; my plans are too important to be interfered with by a meddlesome fool."

"But you can scarcely expect me to give such a promise?"

"Well, I don't know about that. It doesn't pay to be too obstinate. You have been in the army, I understand; then you are aware there is a harsh side to life, a way to make or break men. All right, now I've got the power; I can keep you locked up here; I could even kill you if necessary. You are utterly helpless. There is an argument

worth your consideration. But I will give you yet another which may have even more weight."

"What?"

The door opened quietly, and then closed, leaving Natalie Coolidge standing there in the light, her eyes slightly frowning as she looked silently at the two men.

"The lady, of course," explained Hobart, rising to his feet, "you will, at least, be gentleman enough to accept her word!"

She waited, seemingly unable to quite grasp the situation, or realize the part she was called upon to perform, but as West failed to respond, finally asked a question.

"What is it, Jim? You sent for me?"

"Yes, as a last resort. You recognize this man?"

"Of course," indifferently; "what is he doing here?"

Hobart laughed.

"It seems the fellow hasn't taken his dismissal very seriously, Natalie," he explained, "and remains very much interested in your affairs. That covers the principal known facts in the case."

"You mean he followed me here?"

"He was on the trail, but just for what particular

purpose I have failed to learn; the lad is a bit close mouthed, but it looks to me as though he was in love with you."

The girl smiled, tossing her head as she stepped forward.

"In love with me," she echoed. "That is a joke, yet I had some such suspicion when I told him to quit the job. He acted like a fool then, and began to question me as though he had a right. It was that being engaged business most likely."

"Sure; he thought he had you copped, fortune and all, and it looks to me like he needs another jolt to put the idea entirely out of his head. That is what I brought you in for. I'll explain first just how it happened. This army guy blew in here before dark, along with another fellow, Sexton, who used to be a servant out at Fairlawn—you know him?"

"Yes; he was discharged yesterday."

"I was standing by the bar talking with Issy, and I was sure I knew this lad's face. I was stumped a bit at first where I had seen him; then all at once it came to me—he was the guy sitting out there alone in the automobile over on Arch Street. I knew then what he was over here for, and got to talking with him. He give himself

away the first thing, and that is why we got him up in this dump."

"How did he know I was here?"

"Some of your precious help out there heard you talk to me over the 'phone, and passed it on."

"And what does he want? What do these men want?"

"Well Sexton don't want much of anything—he's knocked out; the fool made a fight, and had to be hit; and, as to this bird, I rather think he was just naturally nosing around out of curiosity, and because he was stuck on you. I don't figure he is anything to be afraid of, but I am not going to have the fellow gum-shoeing around. I'll take his word to get out, and stay out; otherwise he and I are going to have a little seance of our own. That's all there is about it."

West had said nothing, watching the others, and waiting to choose some course of action. His mind was confused, uncertain, yet he found encouragement in Hobart's statement of the case. The fellow felt no serious fear of him; had no suspicion as yet that anyone believed Percival Coolidge murdered. The probability was that not even the girl dreamed of such a thing. Whatever her connection might be with this man, she must be innocent of so foul a crime. If he could

only speak to her alone; bring to her the truth; reveal to her the real character of this man Hobart, there would be no doubt of the result. In spite of the strange situation he yet retained faith in the girl; she had been deceived, led astray in some manner, but his first impression of her true nature still controlled his thought. He could only believe her a victim of scheming villains, driven by circumstances to play a part utterly foreign to her character. His only hope of learning the facts from her own lips, or of re-establishing her faith in him, lay in a moment's conversation alone. His mind instantly leaped to this conclusion, and his eyes met her own. They were wide-open, full of curiosity yet not unkind. He spoke swiftly.

"That sounds fair enough, Hobart," he said quietly, taking the chance as though it was the most natural thing in the world. "I am not hunting trouble in any way, or seeking to butt in where I am not wanted. Your guess as to my purpose in coming here is about right. I had no other object but to be of some service to this young lady. If I can talk with her a moment alone, and thus assure myself as to her wishes, I'll give you any pledge you want, and forget all about the affair. Is that satisfactory?"

"Alone, you said? You want to see her alone?"

"Absolutely; no other arrangement will answer. I want her to talk freely; to answer my questions with no interference."

Hobart glanced toward his companion inquiringly, evidently inclined to deny the request.

"Hell, you don't want much," he said rather gruffly. "What do you think about this proposition, Natalie?"

The girl smiled, her eyes still on West's face.

"Fair enough," she admitted as though the whole matter was a joke. "The man can do me no harm, and I am willing enough to be interviewed. It looks like the easiest way out."

His mood changed, influenced, no doubt, by her confidence in the result.

"All right, if you say so. It is my guess you are equal to the job. How much time do you want, West?"

"Ten or fifteen minutes. I want to get down to the bottom of this thing."

"Oh, you do, hey? Modest as ever, I see. Well, here's luck to you. You needn't be afraid of the guy, Natalie; we got his gat before we brought him up here, and if he makes any break, I'll be out in the hall ready to take a hand. You're still for it?"

"Yes," indifferently, seating herself on a con-

venient chair. "We might as well talk it out now as any time. You go on, Jim, and leave it to me."

Hobart was not entirely satisfied, hesitating as he lit a fresh cigar, his keen eyes watchful of them both. However, it was plain to be seen the girl had made her decision, and he evidently knew her well enough to realize the uselessness of revolt.

"All right, then," he replied finally, turning to the door. "Suit yourself, only watch your step. Anyhow, I'll be within calling distance, if this guy gets gay."

"Don't worry about that," a flash of anger in her eyes. "I am no baby, Jim Hobart. Go on now, and leave Captain West to me."

He closed the door behind him, and the two were alone in the room. No sound reached them from without, not even an echo of Hobart's footsteps in the hall. West looked across at the girl, who sat motionless, her eyes shaded by long lashes, and ringless fingers clasped in her lap. She appeared indifferent, uninterested, scarcely aware of his presence. He wondered if Hobart was listening at the door; what had become of Mike, and whether Sexton was alive or dead. For the moment he could scarcely make himself realize the true situation. His silence served to arouse her

interest, for she suddenly lifted her head and looked at him.

"Well," she said soberly. "You have something to ask?"

"Much—yes; but first, are we alone?"

"Certainly—why?"

"This man Hobart, you are sure he is not listening at the door?"

She glanced about; then laughed.

"Little good that would do him; there is no key-hole, no chance for sound to penetrate. We are quite alone, Captain, and you are perfectly free to say whatever you please."

"But even then, is this wholly fair?"

"What do you mean?"

"I came here," he explained earnestly, "with no bad intention; no desire to injure any one, Miss Coolidge; my only thought the possibility of being of some service to you."

"That is very interesting, I am sure. I am quite grateful."

"Then I am going to ask you a favour. Release my hands and feet. You need not be afraid; I give my pledge to make no attempt at escape while we are together. Will you do this?"

CHAPTER XVI

WEST MAKES HIS CHOICE

THE girl neither answered, nor hesitated, but crossed the room swiftly, her hands seeking the lashings about his wrists. Her movement thrilled him, and his blood leaped at the soft touch of her fingers.

"Really, I did not realize you were tied into the chair," she exclaimed indignantly. "Hobart is a fool to do such a thing. Why, what has caused him to become so frightened? Tell me, Captain West, how all this occurred?"

"You know nothing?"

"Only what has been said since I entered the room. Mike simply told me they had a man here who Hobart thought was a detective, and he wanted me to come in a moment. I came, and found you. Now, please, what does it all mean?"

She slipped back to her seat again, her eyes on his face, as he arose and stretched his limbs to restore circulation. To his quick glance her face

expressed only sympathy, and innocent interest. Any doubt he may have felt as to the sincerity of the girl vanished instantly; whatever of crime was concealed here, she had no suspicion. He could tell her the whole story without fear.

"I'll try and explain, Miss Natalie," he began rather lamely, "although perhaps, you may not wholly understand the motives which have prompted me. This, of course, is really no business of mine, and the only thing that has involved me is the deep interest I have felt in you."

"In me! why that is rather interesting. It was to serve me you came here?"

"At least I thought so. Shall I make it more definite? No doubt you are aware that you are an unusually pretty woman. Well, at least, I think so for one, and our first meeting, with its subsequent adventures, was romantic enough to shake me out of a commonplace existence. In fact, I became quite deeply interested in you."

"Why really, Captain," she interrupted, slightly puzzled. "I perhaps do not fully comprehend to what you refer. Do you mean there was something between us? Some special intimacy?"

"Oh, no; not that; probably no dream of what was occurring in your mind. Yet the circum-

stances of our meeting were peculiar; they rendered a very brief acquaintance into what promised to become a real friendship."

"How do you mean?"

"Surely you cannot have forgotten so soon," he exclaimed in surprise at her attitude, seating himself once more and facing her determinedly. "I came to you in response to a strange advertisement; you trusted me so completely as to introduce me to your friends as your fiancé, and later confided to me the special trouble you were in. I pledged you my assistance, and it was surely very natural that, under these circumstances, I as a young man, should have become rather deeply interested—"

"In both the case, and the girl."

"Yes; so much so, indeed, that even when I was rather harshly dismissed, I could not accept it without a protest. I had grown to feel that this was not a mere business arrangement between us. Do you understand now?"

"I can see it from your stand-point. But nevertheless, I am surprised, Captain West. You—you mean you actually fell in love with me?"

"I felt a very, very deep interest in you," he admitted gravely, "a greater interest than I have ever felt in any other woman. That is my sole

excuse for becoming involved in your affairs. I could not bear to see you make a mistake it might be in my power to prevent."

"What mistake?"

"Well, first of all, trusting in this man Hobart."

She laughed, her eyes glancing up quickly into his face.

"And why now, please? Remember your confession; I may think this only jealousy."

"You are not so silly as that," earnestly. "Moreover, I may as well be perfectly frank. I did confess an interest in you, and in a measure, I still feel eager to serve you in every possible way; but you have changed so greatly, Miss Natalie, that my confidence in you has been severely tried."

"You no longer believe?"

"I hardly know; I fail utterly to understand you of late; you seem an entirely different girl. For one thing, you have deliberately deceived me."

"Indeed! in what?"

"In your visit to Arch Street with Percival Coolidge. That was no mission of charity to a poor widow and children."

"What then?"

"An arranged conference with this fellow Hobart. He rented that cottage for no other purpose,

and left it the next day. You made a mistake when you took me along."

She straightened up slightly in the chair, yet spoke rather indifferently, her voice cold.

"No doubt I did," she said tersely. "Indeed I have already discovered, Captain West, that I made an even greater mistake when I first took you into my service. You have proven altogether too inquisitive. Now I will be plain with you. Whatever need I once supposed I had for your services ended with the explanation I received in that Arch Street cottage. I told you so very distinctly after our return home. You recall that interview, no doubt?"

He bowed, waiting for her to go on.

"You were then and there dismissed from my service. That should have been sufficient. I knew nothing of your silly feeling of personal interest in me; nor did I realize any occasion for discussing with you the reasons causing me to change my plans. You were my employee, and I discharged you; that was all. It is true Percival Coolidge took me to that cottage to have certain mysterious things explained, and they were explained to my complete satisfaction."

"By Hobart?"

"Yes."

"You knew the fellow before?"

She hesitated slightly, although there was no perceptible change in the answering voice.

"For several years; he was in my father's employ; the—the whole trouble originated in a joke, and—and was quite amusing, once I understood. Of course, after that, I had no further need for you. Why did you persist in annoying me?"

West hesitated an instant, his mind struggling with the situation. Was she honest, truthful, in this statement? Could he say anything which would change her viewpoint? She must have been deceived by these men, yet how could he expose them so she would comprehend? He was so little certain of the facts himself, that he had nothing but suspicion to offer.

"Why do you not answer, Captain West?"

The girl's eyes were clear, insistent, a little amused; they somehow aroused his determination.

"I will endeavour to make you understood, Miss Natalie," he explained slowly. "I would not have you feel that I deliberately pushed myself into this affair. When I left Fairlawn after your dismissal, I had no thought of ever seeing you again. I have already told you the interest I had felt in you up to that time, but your abruptness during our last interview, left me angry, and with no inclina-

tion to seek your presence again. You can scarcely blame me for such a feeling?"

"No," she confessed. "I—I was so excited and nervous I was not very nice."

"You certainly hurt me. I departed with a sense of wrong rankling, and no desire to come back. But fate intervened. You know, perhaps, that I overheard the shot which ended the life of Percival Coolidge, and I was the first to discover his dead body. This made no particular impression on me at the time. I supposed it a case of suicide, and so bore witness at the inquest. The whole matter would have ended there; but the next day you discharged Sexton also, and the man sought me out at the Club."

She leaned forward, her lips parted, a new light in her eyes.

"He told you something? He made you suspicious?" she asked breathlessly.

"He caused me to see the affair from a somewhat different point of view—a point of view which, I confess, revived my interest in you. I began to believe you had been deceived, and your treatment of me arose through a misunderstanding; I thought you a victim, and that I would be a cad if I failed to stand by you. We put this

and that together, carried out some investigations quietly, and arrived at a definite conclusion."

"What investigations?"

"In the field where the body was found first," West went on steadily, but no longer looking at her, "tracing the different tracks through the clover. Then I looked up that cottage in Arch Street, and thus learned about Hobart. Somehow he seemed to fit into the picture, and your mysterious visit there made me anxious to interview the man. He had left no address however, just faded out of sight suddenly, which increased suspicion. Then, when we were completely baffled, Sexton learned about your conversation over the telephone."

"How? Was he at the house?"

"Yes; he went out at my suggestion."

"And heard me repeat this number?"

"It makes no difference how he got the information; we knew you were coming here this afternoon, and jumped at the conclusion that you were going to meet Hobart for some reason."

"Very bright, I am sure," and there was a tone of relief in her voice. "And that is your whole story, I suppose? What does it amount to?"

"Not very much, perhaps."

"And the two of you came out here seeking to learn my business, to pry into my personal affairs. That was not a very gentlemanly act, Captain West, and I hardly see how you can justify yourself."

"I had two purposes," he insisted, "either of which justify. I felt it a duty to locate this man Hobart; and also to warn you of the danger you were in."

"Warn me!" she laughed scornfully. "That is ridiculous enough surely. I have a perfectly good reason for being here, but I am not accountable to you in any way for my movements. A duty you say—a duty to locate this man? A duty to whom?"

"To the State, if no one else," he answered gravely. "Percival Coolidge did not commit suicide; he was murdered."

"Murdered!" she came to her feet with utterance of the word. "You cannot think that!"

"I know it, Miss Natalie; the evidence is beyond question; he was murdered in cold blood."

"But by whom? for what purpose?"

"These points are not yet determined; I am only sure of the crime."

"Yes, but—but you suspect Jim Hobart. Isn't that true? You came here seeking him—yes, and

me. You even think I know how this death occurred. You—you connect it with my fortune."

"No, Miss Natalie," he protested stoutly, moved by her agitation. "The cause is a mystery, and who did it equally mysterious. The evidence thus far unearthed is all circumstantial."

"Then why did you come out here searching for Hobart?"

"Because of his strange meeting with Percival Coolidge the very day of his death; because his sudden disappearance furnished the only clue."

"And that is all the knowledge you possess, absolutely all?"

"Yes; I am no more than groping in the dark. My main object in coming was to put you on your guard."

"You have repeated these suspicions to no one else? The Police?"

"To no one. Only Sexton and I have even talked the matter over. We are both too loyal to you to ever say a word which might be to your injury."

She suddenly held out her hand, and he took it, conscious of the firm clasp of her fingers.

"I thank you, Captain West," she said sincerely, "and believe your purpose was honourable. You have told me frankly all you suspect, and doubtless

you have reasons. You have simply made a mistake, that is all. Percival Coolidge was not murdered; he killed himself because he had muddled my affairs, and knew he was about to be discovered. You have got upon a wrong trail. Will you accept my word for this, and drop the whole matter here?"

West was almost convinced, but not quite; the explanation had not been sufficiently explicit.

"This man Hobart—who is he? What connection does he have with your affairs?"

She hesitated slightly, yet her eyes did not fall, or her apparent cordiality change.

"Mr. Hobart," she explained, "I have known for years. I told you before he was once in my father's employ. Now he is a private detective, and was employed on my case, before I advertised for you. I thought then he was not accomplishing anything, but at our interview Sunday, all was cleared up."

"In the presence of Percival Coolidge?"

"Yes; he was given a week in which to straighten matters. That was why he killed himself."

"But why is it necessary for you to meet Hobart in a place like this—a veritable thieves' den?"

She shrugged her shoulders, releasing his hand.

"He has not completed his work, and does not

think it best for us to be seen together. I know him so well I am not at all afraid, even here. Is that all, Captain West?"

"It seems to explain everything," he admitted, yet far from satisfied.

"And you will drop the whole affair?" she asked anxiously.

"If I say yes—what?"

"You will be released from here of course, and the whole misunderstanding forgotten."

"And otherwise?"

"I have no means of knowing what the men intend to do. They will accept your pledge, I am sure."

"Possibly, but I am not so sure I will consent to give such a pledge."

"Then you do not accept my word; do not believe what I have told you?"

"Not that exactly, Miss Natalie; I could have faith in your word, except that I believe you to be mistaken, deceived. Hobart is not square; he is using you for his own ends. Under these conditions, I would be a coward to give such a promise, and leave you helpless in this man's power."

"You intend then to refuse?"

"I do; I'll fight it out."

She stared at him, scarcely believing her own

ears, her lips parted, a look of angry fright in her eyes.

"You are a fool, Captain West," she burst forth at last, unable to hold back the words. "I have done my best for you, and you spurn that. Now look out."

She stepped backward, still fronting him, and, with hand behind her, rapped sharply on the panel of the door.

CHAPTER XVII

FACING DEATH

THE change in the girl was so pronounced, her action so impetuous, as to leave West startled and silent. The thought came to him instantly that she was not the innocent victim he had supposed. Her words, and movements expressed disappointment, rather than regret. She was angry at his choice, ready to withdraw from him all sympathy, all assistance. Her plea had failed, and the woman had become a tigress. Then she must have been endeavouring to deceive him; as deeply interested as these others—in getting him safely off the trail of this crime. It was a hard lesson, one that instantly turned all his theories upside down, but the truth came to him with blinding, sickening force—she was as guilty as Hobart; they were both working to the same end, endeavouring to get him safely out of the way. They would accomplish this with lies if possible, if not then with force. It was for no other purpose he had been granted this interview

alone—in the hope that he might thus be deceived by her. Now he saw through the trick.

These thoughts swept West's brain in a sudden flash of revelation, but he had no chance to act; to denounce her, to make a single movement, before the door opened swiftly, and Hobart slipped eagerly into the room. The first glance the fellow had of the prisoner, standing erect and unbound, must have deceived him into believing the girl had succeeded in her quest.

"So you've set him free," he exclaimed. "The fellow has come to his senses, has he?"

"No, he has not," she snapped with temper darkening her eyes. "I was not afraid of him, so I let him loose, but he's made me no promise. Now it is up to you; I'm done."

She slipped out through the opening, and Hobart leaned against the door, pushing it shut behind her, his scowling eyes watching West intently.

"So, that is how it stands, is it, my man?" he growled threateningly. "You even refuse to accept the word of the lady, do you?"

"Those are very nearly the facts," West replied steadily. "Then I told her I thought she must be mistaken; now I believe she was sent here for no other purpose but to deceive me.

If I ever had any doubt of a crime, it has vanished since this interview."

"What crime?"

"Murder; the killing of Percival Coolidge. Is that plain enough, Hobart? I want you to understand. I am fighting this case from now on in the open; it is going to be man to man."

"What the hell do you mean, you cur?"

"I'll tell you," Went on West coldly, determined now to so anger the fellow as to bring the whole matter to a climax, reckless of the consequences. "I charge you with murder. I haven't the proof, but I'll get it; I do not know the object, but I'll find out."

"You fool! you'll never get away from here. My God, you must be crazy!"

"Never was saner in all my life, Hobart. I am a soldier, and am taking a soldier's chance. Now listen. I feel no particular interest in the death of Percival Coolidge. In my judgment the world is just as well off with him dead as alive. But what this means to Natalie Coolidge is another matter entirely."

"She told you—"

"Yes, she told me—a lie. That is what hurts; what makes me ready to take any chance to put you where you belong. You have lied to her, de-

ceived her, made her your accomplice in crime. I'm fighting for a woman, because she has got no one else to fight for her."

"Oh, I see; in love, hey—with her, or her money?"

"With neither so far as I know," frankly. "She is a woman helpless in your hands; that is sufficient."

"But, hell, she hasn't any use for you—didn't she tell you so?"

"Quite plainly—yes. But that is no excuse for any man to play the coward. I am not afraid of you, Hobart, or your gang. You got me before by treachery; I was not looking for trouble. But now I am. I am going through that door, and if you try to stop me you are going to get hurt."

The fellow grinned, one hand thrust into the outer pocket of his coat, his eyes narrowed into ugly slits.

"You think so! You haven't a weapon on you, West, and if you take a step, I'll put you out of commission. I know how to handle your kind, you big bluffer. What I want to know is what you have got in your head, for, believe me, I don't take any stock in this woman stuff. Are you after the coin?"

"What coin?"

"Well, maybe a slice of old Coolidge's boodle. There's enough of it for all hands to have a dip. How does that hit you?"

"Sounds interesting at least," admitted West, so earnestly as to attract the other's attention. "But let's talk it over among ourselves—who is listening there?"

Hobart glanced behind at the nearly closed door. It was for only a second he was off guard, yet that was enough. With one leap forward, West struck, his clinched fist smashing against the side of the fellow's jaw. It was a wicked, vicious blow, with all the propelling force of the body behind it, and Hobart went down stunned, crashing the door tightly shut as he fell. Once he strove blindly to reach his feet, tugging madly at the weapon in his pocket, but West, feeling no mercy, and wide awake to the fact that any shooting would mean a call for help, struck again, sending his groggy opponent flat, and unconscious. It was all the swift work of a minute, and there had been no noise to arouse alarm. Hobart had not even cried out; the only audible sounds being the sharp click of the door, and the dull thud of a falling body.

West emptied the man's pockets, slipping two revolvers into his own; then stood for an instant

motionless, staring down into the white, upturned face. He had followed the impulse of the moment; had struck savagely; knowing it was his only chance. Thus far he had done well; but what next? He was conscious of but one thought, one purpose—to escape from this house, unpledged and still free to act. Yet how could this be accomplished? He had no plan, no knowledge even of his surroundings, of what lay beyond the walls of this room. His eyes swept the bare interior, seeing nothing to inspire hope. Hobart had said this room was practically a prison, and it looked it—the walls bare, and unbroken, and a rough single cot. All possibility of egress lay in the closed door, and a narrow window high up in the opposite wall, also tightly shut, and shaded by a heavy curtain.

His hand tried the door cautiously; the knob turned easily enough, but there was no yielding to his pressure. The lock was evidently on the outside, and he could discover no key-hole, no possibility of operating it from within. Then, besides in all probability, a guard would be posted outside in the hall, waiting for some signal from Hobart. West glanced again at the recumbent figure, bending over to make sure of his condition, then, gripping a chair, silently crossed the room.

There was not a minute to lose. He knew that he must choose quickly whatever course he pursued. Any instant Hobart might recover consciousness, and gain assistance by a rap on the door; indeed his confederates without might not wait for the signal. The silence within, the length of time, might arouse suspicion. The only chance lay in immediate action. Standing on the chair West found the window had been securely nailed into place, but this had been done so long ago, it was quite possible for him to work the nails loose, yet it required all his strength to press up the warped sash sufficiently far to enable him to gain a view outside. It was not encouraging. Evidently he was upon the third floor, at the rear of the building, looking down into a cluttered up back yard. His eyes could scarcely distinguish what was below, as the only glimmer of light came from a far distant street lamp at the end of an alley, the faint rays creeping in through holes in the fence. Yet one black shadow seemed to promise the sloping roof of a shed directly below; but even with that to break his fall, it was a desperate leap.

He stared into those uncertain depths, endeavouring to measure the distance, deceived by the shifting shadows, afraid of what lay hidden below.

For the moment he forgot all that was behind him, his whole mind concentrated on the perils of so mad a leap into the dark. The awakening came suddenly, the chair jerked from beneath his feet, his body hurled backward. He fell, gripping at the window seat, so that he was flung against the support of a side wall, able to retain his feet, but not to wholly ward off a vicious blow, which left him staggering. Half blinded, West leaped forward to grapple with the assailant, but was too late. Hobart rushed back out of reach of his arms, and rapped sharply on the door panel. It opened instantly, and big Mike, closely followed by another man, pushed forward into the room. West was trapped, helpless; one man pitted against three. He backed slowly away, brushing back the dishevelled hair from his eyes, watching them warily, every animal instinct on the alert.

Mike took one comprehensive glance at the scene, at the overturned chair, the half-open window, the trapped man crouching motionless against the further wall. The meaning of it all was plain, and his bar-room training gave quick insight as to the part he was to play. He spoke gruffly out into the dark of the hall behind him, an order to some one concealed there; then shut the door tightly, and faced West, his head lowered

like a bull about to charge. West understood; he was locked in to fight it out—three against one. Hobart was nearest to him, his face swollen and red, his eyes ugly slits, with teeth snarling between thin lips. The fellow laughed sneeringly, as their glances met.

"Now we'll take care of you, Captain," he taunted. "Never mind his guns, Mike; there's not a load in either of them. Give the guy what he is looking for. Come on you terriers!"

But West did not wait. There was only one chance, and he took it—to carry the fighting to them. He had no doubt of the emptiness of his guns, and hurled one straight at Hobart's head, leaping forward with the other clutched in his hand straight at Mike, who had scarcely time to fling up one hand in defence. The thrown weapon missed its mark by a narrow inch, striking the wall behind, and falling clattering to the floor, but the other broke through the big saloon-keeper's guard, and sent him reeling to his knees, a gush of blood reddening his hair. Again and again West struck him, driving him prone to the floor before the other two dragged him away, wrestled the weapon from his hand, and closed with him in a desperate death grapple.

What followed he never could relate. He was

mad with fury of the fight. A mere animal defending life with every means at hand, caring nothing for either wound or hurt so that he won out in the end. Mike was out of it, but the two grappling him fought like wild cats, rough barroom fighters, resorting to any tactics to disable their opponent. Yet it was this that saved him. Crazed as he was, madly as his brain whirled in the fierce struggle, his long training held supreme —he knew how to fight, remembered instinctively every trick and guard. Again and again his clinched fist reached its mark, and slowly he broke away from clutching hands, and regained his feet. It was a terrific struggle, but luck, as well as skill, was with him. The next he knew, out of the red ruck, was that he had Hobart by the throat, jammed against the wall, with fingers clinched in the throat. Then he saw the other coming, a dim, shapeless thing, that he kicked at viciously. The boot must have landed, for he was suddenly free to strike the purple face fronting him, and fling the helpless rocking body in a huddled mass on the floor.

By God, it was over with; he had won breathing space, a chance to see what was about him. Yet that was all. The fellow he had kicked was already up, doubled from the pain of the blow,

but with mad eyes glaring at him. Hobart had struggled to his knees, cursing fiercely as he swept the blood out of his eyes. They would both be on him again in a minute, more desperate than ever, and the door was locked—there was no chance there. The window! Ay! there was the window. Death either way, yet a chance; and he was man enough to take it. He leaped on the chair, and clambered up; he heard Hobart swear, and felt the grip of a hand on his dangling leg; kicked himself free, and was on the ledge. He never looked below, or took time to poise for the leap. Heedless, desperate, scarcely realizing what he was doing, he flung his body out over the edge, and fell.

CHAPTER XVIII

UNDER COVER

THE shed roof was below, and he struck it, fortunately feet first, but the sharp slant of the boards sent him hurtling forward over the edge into a miscellaneous pile of boxes beneath, his body finally resting on the hard ground. He lay there dazed, the breath knocked entirely out of him, bruised, and scarcely certain whether he was dead or alive. For the moment, he seemed to have lost all consciousness, unable to realize even what had occurred in that upper room, or to comprehend the necessity of immediate flight All about him was intense darkness, and, after the crash of his fall, no sound broke the silence. He could see nothing, hear nothing to arouse his faculties; his flesh quivered with pain, although he felt sure no bones were fractured, for he could move both arms and limbs freely, while after the first shock, his mind returned to activity, dominated by the single conviction that he must get

away from there before those men could get down stairs.

But how? He retained no strength, no ability to use his limbs sufficient to carry him away from the neighbourhood swiftly. He felt paralysed, numb, even his brain functioning strangely, the danger of his helpless condition its only incentive to action. He endeavoured to rise, rolling partially over in the effort which failed, but the movement, slight as it was, left one hand dangling over an excavation at his right. His fingers explored the edge of this opening cautiously, revealing a cellar-way, leading down into the basement. The opening was black, silent, mysterious, yet it was a hiding place. If he could manage to roll down those steps into those depths below, he might hide there unseen, until he regained strength, until the first effort at pursuit had been abandoned. Then there might be a chance for escape.

West grasped the idea clearly enough. Those fellows would be there swiftly. If they found him gone they would have no doubt but what he landed safely, and had made a get-away. They would search, of course, perhaps out into the alley, hoping he might have been injured, but it was hardly probable they would think to explore the cellar. Even if they did, he could surely creep

into some dark corner where he might escape observation. Anyway, crippled as he was, this offered the one and only chance. He could not argue and debate; he must act.

He rolled over, and lowered himself down into the opening, locating the half-dozen broken and rotted steps with his feet. He made no attempt to stand, but simply slid down, finding a partially closed door at the bottom, the passage-way blocked by a litter, the exact nature of which could not be determined in the darkness. With some difficulty, and more than ever conscious of his weakness, and the pain of bruises, he managed to crawl over this pile of debris, and crouch down finally in the intense blackness within. He felt like a trapped rat, still gasping for breath, his body quivering from exertion.

Yet his retreat had been none too rapid. The silence above was broken by the creak of an opening door, the sound of excited voices, and a sudden gleam of light, finding entrance through the open cellar-way. West startled, crept back into a corner, every nerve alert at approaching peril. He recognized Hobart's voice, as the fellow plunged down the steps from the first floor out into the yard.

"To hell, of course he's here!" he stormed.

"My God, man, he dived out head first; I saw him. He'll be dead as a door nail now. Come on with that lantern, Turner. Where in thunder is the ladder—does any one know?"

"You think he lies on the roof?"

"Why not? That's where he must have struck, ain't it, Shorty? I don't know though; it is so steep he'd most likely roll off. Here, you, let me take the glim. There's nothing here in these boxes. Ah, there's the ladder; climb up, Shorty, and see if the guy is stuck anywhere on the roof. Go on! What are you afraid of; if he's there, he's a stiff all right, believe me."

Turner's voice, hoarse and rumbling, came back from above.

"There ain't nuthin' up here, Jim. Damn me, if I don't believe the cuss got clean away. Gee, but he was sure a nervy guy all right."

"Nervy? Crazy, you mean. But he never took that fall without busting something. The bird is lying about here somewhere. You make sure he ain't up there, Shorty."

"Well, he ain't; I kin see every inch o' this roof. Perhaps he fell in between them barrels down there."

The two evidently searched thoroughly, the rays of the lantern dancing wildly about, while Hobart

savagedly cursed his companion, and reiterated his belief that no man could ever take that plunge, and escape unhurt.

"It couldn't be done, I tell you; maybe he could crawl, but that would be all. Why he went down head first; I saw him go out the window, and that drop would daze a cat. Say, Shorty, maybe the stiff dropped down into this cellar-way. Let's take a look."

The light streamed in through the narrow opening, and some one scrambled cautiously down the rotted steps. West, drawing himself securely back behind the protection of his barrel, saw the lantern thrust forward, and a face behind it peering in the shadows. The fellow did not advance into the room, but Hobart did, pressing his way roughly past, and standing there full in the glow of light, staring about into the dim shadows. He evidently saw nothing to arouse suspicion, for his voice was angry with disgust.

"Not a damn sign here, Shorty. It looks like the fellow maybe did get away. But it beats me how. There ain't no place now for us to look but the alley."

"An' if he ain't there?"

"Then we'll hop this dump mighty sudden, I'm telling you. We'll slip out and leave Mike to

explain how he got his coco cracked. With that guy loose, it won't be healthy for me hanging around here."

"He ain't got the goods on you, has he?"

"No, he ain't got the goods, but he is dead wise to some things, and he didn't get out of that shindy up stairs without getting hurt. He'll be sore all right, and will raise all the hell he can. It's safer to keep out of the way."

"An' what about that other buck, Hobart? It won't do to have him picked up, if this guy gets the harness bulls to take a look around here."

"That ain't his style, Shorty; he won't spiel anything to the cops about this row. He's an ex-soldier, a Captain, and he's nuts on the girl. That's why he dipped into this mess—trying to save her—see? Maybe he won't be so keen now, after the song and dance she gave him up stairs. I'm half inclined to think the guy will drop out entirely, damn glad to get off alive, now he believes she is as rotten as the rest of us. But I ain't sure—maybe he is the kind that sticks. That's why I don't take any chances just now. Things ain't quite ripe for a get away—see?"

"Sure; she gave him some straight stuff, hey?"

"She certainly did; she's as smart as she is good looking. It somehow don't strike me this

guy is going to bother her any more. I'm figuring that he's out of it."

"But his partner?"

"Oh, we'll leave him somewhere propped up against a door. Likely he'll never know what happened to him, or where. He ain't nothing to be afraid of—just a butler with a cracked head. It's the other guy who has got the brains. Come on; let's take a look out in the alley."

Their shadows vanished up the stairs, the glow of light disappearing, and leaving the cellar in impenetrable darkness. West did not venture to move, however, content to wait until thoroughly assured the way for escape was clear. He had not learned much from this conversation, except to increase his conviction that a serious crime was being consummated. The full nature of this conspiracy was as obscure as ever; rendered even more doubtful indeed by the active participation of Natalie Coolidge. This was what puzzled and confused him the most. He could no longer question her direct interest in the affair, or her willingness to assist in overcoming his efforts. Even without the free testimony of the men this fact was sufficiently clear. She had deliberately lied to him, attempted deceit, and then, when he refused to yield to her efforts, had so reported to

Hobart, and left him to his fate. It was manifestly impossible for him to believe in her any longer. Yet what could it all mean? How could she hope to benefit by such an association? Why could she thus shield the murderers of Percival Coolidge? What possible object could there be in the commission of this crime, except to gain possession of her own fortune? It was all mystery to his mind; a new unanswerable question arising wherever he looked.

What strange influence could this man Hobart exercise over the girl? To West's judgment he was in no way the sort of man to appeal to Natalie Coolidge. He was of a low, cunning order, with some degree of outward polish, to be sure, yet inherently tough, and exhibiting marks of a birthright which indelibly stamped him of a social class far below her own. Surely, she could not love the fellow, yet unquestionably he possessed a mysterious power over her, difficult to explain through any other hypothesis. If West had not known the young woman under different conditions, he might have accepted this theory, and dismissed the whole matter from mind. But it was the haunting memory of that earlier Natalie Coolidge, the mistress of Fairlawn, which would not permit his complete surrender. She had seemed all that his dream of

womanhood called for. Unconsciously, he had given her his heart, and he could not tear the remembrance from mind. There was something wrong, terribly wrong; what it was he had no means of knowing, yet, there in the dark, he determined he would know, would never be content until he learned the whole truth. All his hope, all his future, depended on the answer.

Hobart and Turner were absent for some little while; the sound of their voices ceased, but the distant flicker of the lantern enabled West to trace their progress up the alley, and then back again. They returned in no pleasant humour, convinced that their expected victim had escaped safely, but made no further effort to search the yard. Hobart said enough to make it plain that his immediate project was to disappear, leaving Mike to his own devices. With this point settled the two tramped heavily up the stairs, and disappeared within. West, confident at last, that the way was left clear, wriggled out from his place of concealment behind the barrel, and stood erect. He felt stronger now, and in less pain, convinced that his injuries were in no degree serious. He could move his limbs freely and his mind was active. The darkness was so intense he had to grope his way forward, anxious to make no noise which

might betray his presence. No doubt the basement could be reached in some way from the floor above, and any unusual sound below might easily attract attention.

In the intensity of the gloom, his sense of direction failed, taking him somewhat further back before he finally located the exact position of those outer steps. Then as he turned abruptly, his foot came in contact with an obstacle on the floor. For an instant he could not determine what it was; then, with a thrill of horror, he realized the presence of a human body. There was no sound, no movement, and West drew back from contact with the object, shrinking in horror. Then he gripped himself sternly—whoever, whatever this was, he must know. Alive or dead he must determine the truth. He bent over, feeling with his hands in the darkness. Good God, the flesh was warm; it was no cold corpse he touched, but a living human being; ay! tied like a mummy, unable to move hand or foot. Then, as suddenly, his groping fingers, eager enough now, discovered the cause of silence—the man was gagged, cruelly gagged, helpless to utter a sound.

CHAPTER XIX

THE COMING OF A MESSAGE

THE situation once realized, West worked rapidly. If this bound man was Sexton, the quicker he could be released the better. Hobart had already revealed his plans, and might appear at any moment for the purpose of executing them. If escape was to be achieved, it must be accomplished at once. In the darkness his fingers could do nothing with the knot, but the sharp blade of a knife quickly severed the twisted cloth, and the gag was instantly removed from between the clinched teeth. The man moaned, breathing heavily, but made no other sound while West slashed at the cords lashing his limbs, finally freeing them entirely. Not until this had been accomplished did he pause long enough to ask questions.

"There; that's the last. Now who are you—Sexton?"

"Yes, sir," weakly, and in a mere whisper, "an'

I know yer voice, sir. Thank God, yer found me, sir."

"It was a bit of luck; but we'll talk that over later. Now we've got to get out of here. Can you walk?"

"I don't know, sir; after a fashion, maybe. I'm mighty stiff and numb, sir. Oh, Lord, but that hurts; give me a hand, an' perhaps I can make it."

"Take it easy; work your legs up and down like that; good, that will restore the circulation. How long have you been lying here?"

"I don't know, sir," his voice strengthening. "I must have been hit, the way my head aches. The first thing I knew after I went into that room with you, I was lyin' here in the dark. I couldn't move or speak, sir, an' it was so black, I kind of got it into my head maybe I was dead and buried. If it hadn't been for my hearing things—voices talking, and all that—I guess I would have gone clear batty. Maybe I didn't get everything straight, sir, but one o' them fellows was Hobart, wasn't he?"

"Yes; we walked right into his trap. The fellow who came over to the table and talked to us was Jim Hobart. He knew me at first sight it seems, and easily guessed what we were there for."

"And was Miss Coolidge here too, sir?"

"Yes, she was; I had a talk with her that has mixed me all up, Sexton. She seems to be hand in glove with these fellows. But how did you suspect she was here?"

"I heard her voice, sir; up there somewhere, sir, soon after I come to my senses. She and some man went along outside. Sounded like he was makin' her go with him. I couldn't get much of what was said, but he sure talked awful rough, an' she seemed to be pleadin' with him. They wasn't there but just a minute, an' then, a little later, I heard an automobile start up."

"You have no idea how long ago this was?"

"No, I ain't, sir. I been lyin' here about half dead, I guess, an' I don't seem to have known anything after that, until those fellows come down here with the lantern. Were they hunting after you?"

"Yes; I outwitted them up stairs, and jumped from a window. But that is enough talk now; we'll go over the whole affair when we are safely away from this place. How is it? do you think you can navigate?"

Sexton responded by getting slowly to his feet. He trembled, and was so uncertain, as he attempted to grope forward, that West grasped him firmly, helping him slowly toward the foot of the steps. Even this effort, however, helped the man to re-

cover somewhat the use of his numbed limbs, while his breathing became much easier. The two crept up the stairs cautiously, and surveyed the cluttered up yard as best they might in the dim light of the distant street lamp. It appeared entirely deserted, nor was there any evidence that the building above was occupied. No doubt lights were burning within, but if so the shades must have been drawn closely, allowing no reflection to escape. No better opportunity for evading notice could be hoped for, and West, alert now to every chance, made instant decision.

"They are all inside. Creep along behind that pile of lumber to where you see the hole in the fence. I'll be just behind you. That's the way."

The narrow alley was much lighter, yet still dark enough to conceal their movements, as they clung close to the deeper shadows. Except for an old cart it was unoccupied, the surface covered with ashes, so packed as to leave no trace of wheels. Ahead of them at the end of the block, glowed the only street lamp visible. Sexton, by now largely recovered from his late experiences, broke into a run, with West following closely behind. Both were eager to escape from the immediate neighbourhood unseen. Suddenly Sexton stumbled, but arose almost instantly to his feet

again, grasping something which gleamed like silver in his hand.

"Not hurt, are you?" asked West anxiously.

"No; what's this I found?"

The other took it impatiently.

"What is it? Why a small pocket knife, of course. Come on, man, don't stand mooning there." He slipped the article carelessly into his pocket. "Let's get out into the open while the road is clear."

"Where are you going?" Sexton panted, endeavouring to keep beside him. "Have you anything planned out?"

"Not very much; Milwaukee Avenue first. There is sure to be an all-night restaurant somewhere in sight. Telephone for a taxi, don't dare to risk a street car, we both look too tough."

"Suppose they will follow us?"

"Hardly; they will have no idea which way we went, or how long we'll have been gone. All Hobart will think about now will be getting out of sight himself. Once we turn off this street, we'll be safe enough."

It was considerably past midnight when the two men finally reached the University Club; they had lunched at an all-night restaurant, washed and made themselves as presentable as possible, yet

were hardly recognizable as they entered the Club lobby. Neither possessed a hat; Sexton was in his shirt sleeves, while West's coat clung to him in rags. Without waiting to explain anything to the servant in charge, except to state briefly that Sexton would be his guest for the night, the Captain hurried into the waiting elevator, and accompanied by his companion, ascended to his apartment above.

The reaction from the excitement of the evening left Sexton dull and drowsy once he felt secure from any possible danger. His only desire was to lie quiet, and forget. Stretched out on a comfortable lounge, he fell asleep almost instantly, making no effort even to remove his clothes. West was of a different temperament, his mind far too active to find sleep possible. His only desire was to think, plan, decide upon some future course of action. With mind busy, forgetful of the very presence of his companion, he indulged in a bath, again dressed himself, and, lighting a cigar, settled back into an easy chair to fight the whole out alone with himself.

The adventures of the night had greatly changed his conception of this affair in which he had become so strangely involved. The mystery confronting him appeared more difficult of solution

than ever. His first vague theory of the case had already gone completely to smash. Question after question rose before him which remained unanswered. He was more thoroughly convinced than ever that Percival Coolidge had been murdered; that the act had been committed either by Hobart himself, or under his direction. He possessed no proof, however, nor could he figure out a motive for the crime. Who was this Jim Hobart? That was one of the first things to be learned. Was he in any way personally interested in the fortune left by Stephen Coolidge? Or did he hold any special relationship with the murdered man? How could he expect to profit by the sudden death of Percival? More important still, what peculiar influence did the fellow exert over the girl? Here was by far the deeper mystery, the one that troubled him most. The others seemed possible of explanation, but the sudden change in Natalie Coolidge was beyond all understanding.

Except in face, form, dress, outward appearance, she no longer seemed to West as being the same woman he had formerly known. His original interest in her had vanished; he had learned to distrust and doubt her sincerity and truth. Beyond all question she was openly playing an im-

portant part in this tragedy under Hobart's direction, but for the life of him he could not figure out to what end. Still the very mystery of it had its fascination. While he felt no longer any special desire to serve her, to further risk his life in her cause, yet he experienced a fierce determination to learn what all this really meant; to uncover the object these conspirators had in view. Although he imagined love no longer spurred him on, his real interest in the affair became even more intense, with an aroused desire to read the riddle. He convinced himself that from henceforth this was to be his only object—not the girl, nor any attraction she once had for him, but a stern determination to solve this crime, and bring its perpetrators to justice. If she was involved it could not be helped, she would have to suffer with the rest; his own duty was clear.

Yet how could he begin action? What clue did he possess which could be followed? Practically none. Before morning, that saloon on Wray Street would unquestionably be deserted, except perhaps by its proprietor, and Mike would simply deny everything. A search of the place would be useless, for Hobart would be too sly a fox to leave any trail. Two possibilities remained; the police might have some record of the

fellow, might know his favourite haunts, even be able to locate his next probable hiding place. If not, the only hope remaining would seem to be Natalie Coolidge. She would undoubtedly return to Fairlawn; was probably there already, and, by shadowing her, the whereabouts of Hobart would surely be revealed either sooner or later.

But possibly there was a quicker way to learn their purpose than by thus seeking to find either. If it was the Coolidge fortune which was at stake, why not endeavour to learn in whose trust it was being held, and what steps were being taken to safe-guard it? This investigation ought not to be particularly difficult, even though he possessed no authority; he could explain the nature of his interest to an attorney, and be advised how to proceed. Determined to take all three steps the first thing next day, West rested back comfortably in the chair, already half asleep. One hand rested in his pocket, and as his fingers fumbled some object there, he suddenly recalled the knife Sexton had found in the alley.

He drew the article forth curiously, and looked at it under the glow of the electric light—it was a small silver handled pen-knife, such as a lady might carry, a rather strange thing to be discovered in a dirt alley back of Wray Street. The incon-

gruity struck him forcibly, and he sat up, wide awake once more, seeking for some mark of indentification on the polished handle. There was none, not an inscription of any kind, but he noted that the single slender blade did not fit closely down into its place. He opened it idly to learn the cause—beneath appeared the white gleam of tightly folded paper.

CHAPTER XX

WHAT THE TELEPHONE TOLD

ALL West's indifference vanished instantly. He had to pry the paper out, so closely had it been wedged in beneath the closed knife blade, and it required a moment in which to straighten it out so that the writing was discernable. Even then the marks were so faint, and minute, he could not really decipher them until he made use of a magnifying glass lying on the desk. A woman's hand, using a pencil, had hastily inscribed the words on a scrap of common paper, apparently torn from some book—the inspiration of an instant, perhaps, a sudden hope born of desperation. He fairly had to dig the words out, letter by letter, copying them on an old envelope until he had the message complete: *"Please notify police to search Seminole quick."*

West read this over, word by word, again and again. What did it mean? Did it mean anything? Had it any possible connection with the case in which he was interested? There was no

signature, nothing to guide him; yet in some way the plea sounded real, was a cry of distress, an appeal for help. It could be given no other meaning, yet how long had it been lying there in the alley? Not any great length of time surely, for the polished silver was far too conspicuous to escape notice. It must have been dropped during the night, within a very short time of its discovery. But what did the words signify? *"Notify police"* was clear enough, but *"search Seminole"* meant absolutely nothing. What was "Seminole" —an apartment house? A hotel? A saloon? Perhaps the police would know; evidently the writer so believed, or she would never have used the name with such confidence. A familiar name to her, she assumed that the police would have no difficulty in instantly locating the place meant. The haste with which the message had apparently been written, its short, sharp words, bespoke urgent need, the consciousness of imminent peril. Plainly the writer had used the only means at hand in a hurried desperate effort to gain assistance.

"The police." The request had been for the police; then why not appeal to the police? Why not take the note now directly to headquarters, and let them help solve its mystery? At first

West hesitated, yet a moment's thought convinced him this would be the logical course to pursue. He could accomplish nothing alone, unguided. His appealing to the police need not necessarily involve any disclosure relative to the Coolidge matter. He had found this note accidentally in an alley in the northwest section of the city; his being there need require no special explanation; he did not understand its meaning, but it was quite evidently a police matter, and consequently he placed it in their hands. That all sounded natural enough. Besides at this hour of the night there was no other place to which he could go for information.

He looked at Sexton, who was sleeping soundly, and decided not to awaken the man. He had no use for his services just now; the City Hall was only a few blocks away, and he might not be out more than an hour himself. He would leave a note so that if by any chance he should be delayed, Sexton would understand what had occurred. He scratched this off hastily, placed it in a conspicuous place, and swiftly departed, after extinguishing the light. He was no longer conscious of fatigue, or the pain of bruises, his mind eager to learn the meaning of this new discovery.

It had been a quiet night at the City Hall Sta-

tion, and West encountered no difficulty in reaching the presence of the lieutenant in charge. The latter gazed at his caller curiously over an early edition of the morning paper, as the officer who had opened the door to the inner office, said rather doubtfully.

"This guy wants to see you personally, sir; he wouldn't talk to no one else."

"All right, Slavin; shut the door, and I'll hear what he has to say. What is it, my man?"

West explained swiftly and clearly, his manner of speech, as well as his statement as to who he was, evidently making a favourable impression on his listener, who interrupted the brief narrative with several respectfully asked questions. He took the note, spread it out on the desk, and studied it carefully.

"Looks genuine enough," he commented at last, "but not very clear. I don't know any place in this town called Seminole. Wait a minute though; perhaps one of the boys may have an idea."

He pressed a button on top of the desk, and in response to the summons, a side door opened, and a main in plain clothes entered.

"You rang, sir?"

"Yes, McAdams; this gentleman here—"

"Captain West, as I am a sinner!" he exclaimed.

"Gee! but I am glad to see you again, old man! Say. By Gad! you don't remember me."

"Oh, but I certainly do, Mac," and West grasped the extended hand heartily. "It's a devil of a surprise, that's all. Saw you last at Brest, the day you sailed for home. So this was your job, Sergeant?"

"Been with the department ever since I was a kid. Put me in plain clothes since I came back. Lieutenant, this is Captain West, over across the pond with the Engineers; we were buddies for about two months. What was wanted, sir?"

"Well, Captain West has just been telling me a rather peculiar story, and wanted some information I thought perhaps you could give; you know the old town right now better than I do. First of all, do you recall any crook by the name of Hobart—Jim Hobart?"

"Hobart? Hobart? no, not off hand, I don't. How old a man is he, Captain?"

"Middle-aged, anyway; an active fellow enough, but his hair is quite grey."

"Do you know where he hangs out?"

"The last I saw of him was in a saloon known as Mike's Place over on Wray Street."

"Off Milwaukee; yes, I know. Mike is a big

Pole, but has never had any serious trouble so far as I know. However, being there is no special recommendation to a guy, but I don't believe this man Hobart has been pulled since I've been on the force. And you don't recall the name, Lieutenant?"

"No; but he might be an old timer come back. Look him up in the index, Mac. That will soon tell you whether we have got any such mug, or not."

McAdams drew out a thick volume from a near-by cabinet, and ran his fingers swiftly down a long column of names, indexed under the letter "H." Suddenly he stopped, with an exclamation.

"The lad is here all right—Government offence, fifteen years ago, third arrest; mugged number 28113. Let's look him up, and see if he is the same man. Come over here, Captain."

"Is that the fellow?" he asked.

West studied the face seriously.

"Yes, I believe it is, Mac," he said at length. "He looks much older now, but those are his features all right. What was his game?"

"'Con' mostly, according to the record; only one conviction though, two years in Detroit for using the mails to defraud. Oh, yes, here is some-

thing different, 'assault with intent to kill'—indeterminate sentence to Joliet for that. Nothing heard of him since. So he is back, and at the old game again. Do you want him brought in, Captain?"

"No, not yet. I haven't anything against the man now but a suspicion. I wanted to learn his record, that's all. This inquiry was only incidental. What I'm really interested in just at present is something I picked up in the alley back of Mike's Place three or four hours ago. It's a note in a woman's hand-writing, and when I found it, it was hidden in a small silver pen-knife, such as a lady might carry. I thought it might have some connection with the case I'm trying to catch this fellow Hobart in."

"There is a woman in it, then?"

"Yes; but I haven't got things hitched up sufficiently to talk about it. The note itself is blind."

"In what respect?"

"Well, here it is. Can you make it out? I'll read it for you—*"Please notify police to search Seminole quick."*

"No signature?"

"None."

"But that is plain enough, isn't it?"

"Yes, if you know what she means by Seminole; what is it? a street? an apartment house? a saloon? Do you know of anything under that name?"

McAdams stood motionless thinking.

"No, by thunder, I don't," he admitted reluctantly. "There is no street of that name in the city. There used to be a shady hotel over on Ontario Street called 'The Seminole,' but that was torn down ten years ago. I never heard of any other—did you, Dave?"

"No," answered the lieutenant slowly, sucking away at a cigar. "I just been looking over the directory, and I don't find nothing. Maybe it's the name of a boat—seems to me I've heard some such name before, but I don't just recollect where."

"A boat! Well, that's a straw anyway, and worth looking up." Mac picked up the telephone. "Who is on at the Harbour Master's office this time of night?"

"Winchell, usually, and he'll have a record there."

The detective jiggled the receiver impatiently.

"Yes, this is police headquarters calling. Give me the Harbour Master's office, please—I said the Harbour office. Oh, is this you, Dan? Bob McAdams speaking. Do you know of any boat on the lakes called the *Seminole?* What's that? A

lumber schooner at Escanaba? Never makes this port, you say? And you don't know of any other by that name? Sure, I'll hold the wire; look it up."

"Not a very promising lead," he said over his shoulder, "but Dan will have the dope for us in a minute."

He suddenly straightened up, the receiver at his ear.

"I didn't quite get that, Dan. A medium sized yacht, you say? Where is it? Oh, at the Jackson Park lagoon. I see; and who did you say owned it? What's that? I didn't quite catch the name—Coolidge? What Coolidge? Exactly; the fellow who killed himself out south. Hold the wire."

He swung about to face West, the receiver still at his ear.

"This mean anything to you?"

"It surely does," eagerly. "The girl I spoke of was Natalie Coolidge. By all the gods, we are on the right track."

"All right, Dan," resuming his conversation. "What's that? Coolidge had the boat up the river a few weeks ago trying to sell it. That's how you happened to remember the name—I see. Say, is there any one out at Jackson Park I could talk

to at this hour? Who? Oh, yes, the Life Saving Station. Sure: somebody will be on duty there. Thanks, old man—good night."

He hung the receiver up on the hook, and reached for the telephone directory.

"Some luck, I say. Jackson Park—oh, yes, here it is. All right, Central; sure, that is the proper number. This is the City Hall Police Headquarters again; hustle it up, please. Hullo, Jackson Park Life Saving Station? Good; this is McAdams speaking from the City Detective Bureau. Is there a yacht out there in the lagoon called the Seminole? belongs to a man named Coolidge; medium sized boat, with gas engine. Yes; what's that? Not there now; went out into the lake about two hours ago. The hell it did! Who was aboard? do you know? Say that again; oh, you wasn't on watch when she sailed; your partner said what? Three men and a woman. All right, yes, I got it. Say now, listen; this is a police matter, so keep your eyes open. It will be daylight pretty soon, and if you get sight of that boat, call up the City Hall Station at once. Do you get me?"

He wheeled about, smiling whimsically.

"It's on again, off again, Flannigan. We had it, and we have it not. Dave I am getting inter-

ested; I feel the lure of the chase. What say you? Can you spare me for a day or two? You can? good enough; we'll comb the lakes until we find out who is sailing aboard the *Seminole*. You're with me, old man?"

West extended his hand silently, and the fingers of the two clasped in a mutual pledge.

CHAPTER XXI

THE YACHT "SEMINOLE"

THERE was little to do but wait impatiently for some further message of guidance. McAdams dispatched a few telegrams to nearby lake ports, and briefly outlined certain plans of action for the morrow, provided nothing further was heard from the missing boat; these included a possible visit to Fairlawn, and a city-wide search for Hobart, who both men decided could not be included among the party on the yacht. West told his new assistant the entire story in detail, and Mac's interest in ferreting out the matter became intense. It was the kind of case which fascinated him with its mystery, but no theory he could spin born from long police experience, seemed to exactly fit all the revealed facts. The great puzzle revolved about the strange actions of the girl; her part in the affair presenting an unsolvable riddle. They must have talked for an hour, discussing the situation frankly from every angle, yet arriving at no definite conclusion. The sky

in the east was red with dawn when both men fell fast asleep in their chairs, still waiting.

It was nine o'clock, and still no word. The two had eaten a hasty breakfast in a restaurant across the street, discussing the situation again thoroughly, but to no more satisfactory result. It seemed impossible to reconcile certain facts. If the silver knife, with its call for help, had indeed been dropped by Natalie Coolidge, and she was being held a prisoner in the hands of villains on board the *Seminole*, why had she acted toward West as she did in that house on Wray Street? To all appearances there she had been hand in glove with the conspirators, willing even to connive at the Captain's murder if necessary to the success of their crime. Only one theory was possible; that the girl was under constraint, driven to her strange act by personal fear. She dare do nothing else, terrorized by the threats of Hobart, and her own sense of utter helplessness in his power. This, and this only, must be the answer to the riddle.

McAdams, unable to remain quiet, departed to get his police search started in an attempt to discover Hobart in his new hiding place. The fellow could not be on the yacht, as that had sailed from Jackson Port at far too early an hour for him to

have possibly made one of the party. He would still be in the city then, securely concealed in some dive of the underworld, perfecting his plans, whatever they might be, and, perhaps, arranging to join those on the boat later. The detective even thought this unlikely, his theory being that Hobart merely desired to get the girl safely out of the way for a length of time sufficient to enable him to complete his nefarious scheme. He argued that Natalie was in no real danger; she would be held no doubt, kept out of sight as long as was necessary, but otherwise left uninjured. This was no strong-arm crime, but a high class confidence game, and the important thing was to quickly lay hands on Hobart. With him once in the toils, the whole conspiracy would instantly collapse. With this end in view, McAdams took up the man's trail, leaving West to stand guard over the telephone.

The latter called up Sexton, and hurried him out to Fairlawn, with instructions to find out all he could from the servants there relative to any late developments. He expected no important revelation from this point, as Natalie could not have returned home, yet there might have been a telephone communication, or some other occurrence of interest to furnish a clue. Sexton was in-

structed to report the result of his investigation at the earliest moment possible. This accomplished, nothing remained for West to do, but sit down and wait for something else to happen.

The delay was shorter than he anticipated. There was a sharp ringing of the bell, the police operator responding quickly.

"Police Headquarters. What's wanted? McAdams; no he is not in just now. Who is calling him? Harbour Master's office; all right; hold the wire a minute."

He turned his head around.

"Must be your case, Captain; better hear what they have to say."

West grasped the receiver eagerly.

"Is this the Seminole matter?" he asked swiftly. "Certainly, I understand about it. What's that. Oh, Winchell told you to call up if you learned anything. Of course; what is it? Yes, I hear; just found her tied up at north side of Municipal Pier. What's the trouble? Engine working bad, and had to come in, hey? All right—thanks; I'll go straight over and see them."

This was great luck, yet there was very little he could hope to accomplish alone, without the help and authority of McAdams. Even if the vessel had been stolen—which was probably not true—

he possessed no power of arrest. All he could hope to do would be to keep the fellows in sight until Mac showed up, and, if possible, prevent them from putting out into the lake again. Even in that he needs must be cautious not to be seen by any of the gang who might recognize him. An alarm, proving they were being followed, would doubtless send them scattering instantly. If they were to be trapped, no suspicion could be aroused.

West thought of all these things as a taxi bore him across the city to the pier, and acted accordingly. The open air restaurant accorded him every reasonable opportunity for concealment, while affording ample view of whatever was going on. It was a bright, sunshiny day, the waters of the lake a deep blue. No crowd was present, yet enough people were at the tables, or lounging about the pier, to make his presence unnoticeable. The pleasure boat for Lincoln Park, a band aboard, and with a barker industriously busy, was close by, surrounded by a bevy of women and children. Beyond these, on the same side, snuggled close against the cement wall, lay the yacht. West ordered a drink, and sat down at a table within easy view, although partially concealed himself by a pillar supporting the roof.

The *Seminole* was a much larger boat than he had anticipated seeing, yet he could not doubt her being the vessel sought. The name was plainly stencilled on the bow, as well as upon the dingy towing astern. Her deck lay almost even with the promenade, and he was able to trace her lines clearly from where he sat. The craft had evidently been constructed for comfort as well as speed. He noted two short masts unrigged, a bridge forward of the wheel-house, together with a decidedly commodious cabin aft. The deck space between was clear, except for the hatchway leading down to the engine. The planking was clean, as though newly scrubbed, while every handrail glistened in the sun. The cabin appeared tightly closed, even the windows being heavily draped. Some mechanics were evidently working below; there was a sound of hammering, and occasionally a fellow in overalls appeared at the hatch opening. No one wearing any semblance of a yacht uniform was visible, although four or five men lounged about the deck, or close at hand on the pier, apparently connected with the vessel. Two were well-dressed, rather gentlemanly appearing fellows, the others of a decidedly rougher class, although bearing no outward marks of being seamen. While an air of carelessness was assumed

by all these, yet West, watching them closely, felt that they were very much on their guard, anxiously waiting an opportunity to depart. No face among the party had any familiarity; he had encountered none of them at Mike's Place the evening before. Satisfied as to this, he left the table, and strolled out on to the promenade, joining the crowd watching the Lincoln Park boat get underway. So far as he could observe this movement attracted no attention, although a moment later his eyes plainly caught a bit of drapery drawn slightly aside at one of the cabin windows of the *Seminole*, and, he felt convinced, the quick gesture of a woman's hand.

There was a woman on board then! This certainty of knowledge by evidence of his own eyes, set his blood leaping. Whatever the purposes of these people he was again upon the right trail. The uplifted curtain was immediately lowered, and, if any signal had thus been conveyed, there was no other evidence visible. A little later one of the two better dressed fellows loafing on the pier, a rather heavily built man, with closely clipped red moustache, and a scar over one eye, slowly crossed the deck, and entered the cabin. He came forth again a moment later, asked some question of the workmen below and then clam-

bered back carelessly over the rail, joining his companion on the pier.

"A half hour yet; it was quite a job the boy's had, but they are making time. Come over here a minute."

They walked forward, out of earshot from where West sat on a bench in the sun. He watched the fellows closely, yet without neglecting the boat, but they neither glanced toward him, or seemed aware of his existence. Convinced that they felt no suspicion, but were merely exercising ordinary precaution not to be overheard, the watcher soon banished all fear of them from his mind. His whole thought centred on the early arrival of McAdams. Until the detective came, there was nothing he could do but sit there quietly and wait. But what if the necessary repairs were completed, and the *Seminole* sailed before Mac got there? The fellow called Joe had mentioned half an hour, and he probably meant that was the time set by the mechanics for completing their job on the engine. Beyond doubt, the intention was to depart immediately. Was there any means in his power by which this could be prevented? The only suggestion which came to him was the picking of a quarrel in some way, with the two men ashore. The boat would never depart unless they

were aboard, as they were evidently the leaders of the gang, yet this would be a most desperate expedient, to be resorted to only when all other effort had failed. The two were husky chaps, and he would probably be the one to suffer most in such an encounter. Besides it would put them on their guard, and possibly avail nothing. Why not speak to the fellows pleasantly, and naturally? They had no reason to be suspicious of him; he was but one of many others lounging idly about the pier. His curiosity would seem reasonable enough, and he might thus gain some clue as to their destination. Then, even if they did sail before Mac appeared, they could be safely intercepted in time for a rescue. Indeed, such information, if it could be gained, would give opportunity to plan effective action.

Circumstances seemed to work to this end, the two men strolling carelessly back toward where he sat, pausing within a few feet of him, all their attention apparently riveted upon the yacht.

"Had some hard luck?" he ventured. "Engine give out?"

The red-moustached one glanced about, his eyes surveying the speaker indifferently.

"Broke a piston, and had to be towed in," he replied carelessly, "We'll be off again presently."

"Nice day for a sail."

"Sure is."

The very indifference of the fellow led West to take a chance.

"Some nice boat you've got there. The Coolidge yacht, isn't it? Haven't seen it out lately."

"Are you a yachtsman?"

"A bit of an amateur, yes; have a cat-boat I play with some. Belong to the Columbia Club."

"Off Grant Park; this boat quarters in the Jackson lagoon. We left there last night. You knew Coolidge?"

"No, never met him; recognized the boat though. Has it been sold?"

"Not yet. It wasn't his anyway; belonged to the estate. I'm one of the trustees; that's how I've got the use of it—see? Ever looked it over?"

West shook his head.

"No, but I wouldn't mind; she's a dandy."

"She sure is; better inside than out to my notion. Come aboard; we've got time enough. Not thinking of buying a yacht, are you?"

"Well, I might, if the price is not too steep. I've got the fever all right; what I lack maybe, is money. It costs a lot to run a yacht."

"Oh, I don't know. We operate this with three

men as a crew. That's not so bad. Come along with us, Mark; we'll take a look at the cabin first, and then go forward."

The three men stepped over the low rail, and moved aft across the deck, the leader talking fluently, and pointing out various things of interest. His only object apparently was to arouse in West a desire to purchase. The other man never spoke, and the latter gave no thought to his presence. He had been rarely fortunate so far, and was looking for an opportunity to question his guide on the purpose of their voyage. He would wait until later; until the examination had been completed, perhaps, when they believed him a possible purchaser. Joe opened the cabin door, and West stepped inside, the interior darkened by drawn curtains. The dusk was confusing, and he stood still after the first step, hearing the latch click behind him.

CHAPTER XXII

KIDNAPPED

A HAND gripped his shoulder as though in a vise, and swung him around; the muzzle of an automatic confronted him, and behind it the threatening eyes of Joe glared directly into his own.

"Not a move, you damned spy," a voice said coldly. "Now, Mark, frisk the cuss, and be lively about it. Had a gun, hey; I thought so. Give it to me. Now get the cord over there and give him a turn or two. A very good job, old boy; the fellow is safe enough, I should say."

He turned his eyes away, searching the cabin, confident that West was sufficiently secured.

"Come on out, Mary," he said sharply. "Who is this guy, anyhow?"

A woman came forward through the shadows. West had a glimpse of her face, but the features were unfamiliar. A woman of forty, perhaps, still attractive in appearance, with dark hair and

bold black eyes that met his own defiantly. He was puzzled, doubtful as to what it all meant. So this was the woman he had seen on board; not Natalie Coolidge at all. There had been a mistake of some kind; but if so, why had these people given him this sort of reception aboard? These thoughts swept his mind in a flash, as the woman peered forward to see his features more clearly. For a moment she said nothing, and Joe broke out impatiently.

"He's the lad, ain't he?" he asked. "We ain't gone an' picked up the wrong guy?"

"No; he's the bird all right. I never lamped him but once before myself. I heard his name then, but forgot it. He's her friend, there ain't no doubt o' that, Joe, and it ain't likely he's hanging around here just for fun, is it? My idea was it would be safer to take him in."

"Sure; what's yer name, young fellow?"

Concealment was useless; they evidently had him correctly spotted; to lie would do no good.

"Matthew West."

"That's the name," the woman exclaimed eagerly. "He is a soldier—a Captain, or something like that. Jim told me about him; he's the same fellow who was snooping about Mike's Place last night, before we pulled out."

"Is that so? How the hell did you get out of there?"

"We had a little trouble," West admitted, "but they let me go."

"Yes, they did! I know better than that; Hobart don't do business that way. I reckon we've played his game all right taking you in. Well, you don't get out of here so easy, let me tell you. How'd you come to get onto us?"

"That's my business."

"Oh, is it? Well, we'll make it ours from now on. There is one thing pretty sure—you were here playing a lone hand. So it don't make much difference what yer idea was. We'll take the bird along with us, Mary; then he'll be out of temptation."

The woman nodded.

"Jim will know what to do with him," she said. "All we got to do is keep him safe."

"I'll attend to that; come on, Mark, let's throw the damn sneak into that left-hand stateroom. He'll stay there all right. Aw, take hold; don't be afraid of hurting the fellow."

They roughed him forward, but West made no attempt to resist; his hands were bound, and he was helpless. The woman threw open the narrow

door, and he was bundled unceremoniously across the threshold, and thrown heavily to the floor. He struggled partially upright, protesting against being left in that helpless condition, but the red-moustached man only laughed, shutting the door tightly, and locking it. The single port hole was covered by heavy drapery, the stateroom in total darkness. Through the door panels he could hear a voice speaking.

"He's better off that way until we get out of here. You stay here, Mary, till I can attend to him myself. Those fellows ought to have that engine fixed by this time. Mark and I better go up on deck awhile."

"But, Joe, do you think they have caught on to us?" she asked anxiously.

"No, I don't; this guy wouldn't be snooping about alone if they had. He ain't no fly cop, and just happened to be loafin' here—that's my guess. He knew this was the Coolidge Yacht, and that set him to asking questions. That guy don't look to me like he was the kind to be afraid of. All we got to do is hold him here until Jim decides what he's up to. I don't want to hurt him none, unless I have to. Everything else all right, I suppose?"

"Sure; quiet as a mouse; asleep, I guess."

"That's good; well you stay here until I come back. Want a gun?"

She did not answer so as to be heard, but West could distinguish the movement of feet in the outer cabin, and then the closing of a door. Undoubtedly the two men had gone on deck, leaving the woman there alone. His feet were not tied, and he could sit up, although the hands were tightly bound behind him. With eyes accustoming themselves to the gloom, he could discern something of his surroundings. He was in the ordinary stateroom of a small yacht, with barely space in which to move about comfortably. Two bunks were at one side, with a metal stand at their foot for washing purposes. A rug covered the floor, the beds were made, and a stool, screwed to the deck, occupied a position just below the porthole. A few hooks were in evidence on the opposite wall; but no garments dangled from them to tell of previous occupancy. Indeed the place was scrupulously clean, as though unused for some time.

West made his way to the port, pushed aside the curtain with his shoulders and looked out. The smallness of the opening made any hope of escape in that way impossible; nor could he expect to attract the attention of any one ashore.

His view was limited to the east and north, a wide expanse of blue water, the only thing in sight being the pleasure boat bound for Lincoln Park, already little more than a black dot in the distance. Convinced of his complete helplessness, he sat down on the stool to consider the situation.

He had been a fool; there was no doubt as to that; the only thing now was how he could best retrieve his folly. He had walked blindly into a trap, suspecting nothing, confidently relying on his own smartness, believing himself unknown. Now he must find his way out. It angered him to realize how easily it had been accomplished; not so much as a blow struck; no opportunity even for him to cry out an alarm—only that dark cabin, and the threatening revolver shoved against his cheek. He wondered where McAdams was; perhaps hunting him even then on the pier; and Sexton, what had he succeeded in discovering out at Fairlawn? That Natalie Coolidge had returned home, no doubt. At least he no longer believed she was with this yachting party—evidently there was but one woman on board. Yet, whether she was there or not, it was clear enough from what he had heard that this sudden voyage of the *Seminole* had some direct connection with the mystery he was endeavouring to solve. That was why he

had been decoyed aboard, and made prisoner—to keep him silent; to get him securely out of the way. Yet this knowledge revealed nothing as to what their real purpose was.

What did they intend doing with him now that he was in their hands? Joe had declared his fate would be left with Hobart. Then it must be that they had a rendezvous arranged somewhere with that arch-conspirator, some hidden spot along the lake shore where they were to meet shortly, and divide the spoils, or make further plans. Hobart unquestionably was the leader of the gang; but who was the woman? She had evidently been in Mike's Place the night before, and had a glimpse of his face. She must have left with that party in the automobile, yet she surely was not the one who had dropped that note begging the police to search this vessel.

What then had become of the other? If she was being held prisoner, it was not at all probable she had been left somewhere ashore; apparently she had reason to know where she was being taken —to the *Seminole;* otherwise she would never have written as she did. She must have overheard their plans, before she hastily scratched off the note desperately; and yet those plans might have been changed. However, if so, why were these people

—accomplices of Hobart no doubt—fleeing in the yacht, seeking to conceal their identity in an effort to disappear? What were they fleeing from? Why were they so fearful of discovery by the police? What would cause them to kidnap him, merely on suspicion that he was a friend of Natalie Coolidge? The very act was proof positive of the desperation of their crime. It could be accounted for on no other theory.

West paced the narrow space, his brain whirling, as he attempted to reason the affair out, his own helplessness becoming more and more apparent. .What could he do? There was but one answer—absolutely nothing as he was then situated. He could only wait for some movement on the part of the others; his fate was out of his own hands; he had been a fool, and must pay the price. The cords about his wrists chafed and hurt with each movement. The metal wash-stand gave him an inspiration; its upper strip was thin, and somewhat jagged along the edge; possibly it might be utilized to sever the strands. It was better to try the experiment than remain thus helplessly bound. With hands free he could at least defend himself.

He made the effort, doubtfully at first, but hope came as the sharp edge began to tear at the rope.

It was slow work, awkward, requiring all the strength of his arms, yet he felt sure of progress. He could feel the strands yield little by little, and redoubled his efforts. It hurt, the rope lacerating his wrists, and occasionally the jagged steel cut into the flesh cruelly, but the thought of freedom outweighed the pain, and he persevered manfully. At last, exercising all his muscle, the last frayed strand snapped. His wrists were bleeding, and the hands numb, but the severed cord lay on the floor and he again had the free use of his arms. The sudden freedom brought new hope and courage. He listened at the door, testing the knob cautiously. There was no yielding, and for the moment no sound reached him from without. The woman was doubtless there on guard, and any effort he might make to break down the door would only bring the whole gang upon him. Unarmed, he could not hope to fight them all. As he stood there, hesitating, unable to determine what to attempt, he became aware of a throbbing under foot, increasing in intensity. West knew instantly what it meant—they were testing out the engine; if all worked well, the boat would cast off.

He sprang back to the port and stared out, eagerly hoping that, as they swept out into the

lake, he might find some opportunity to communicate with some one on the pier. Perhaps by this time Mac would have arrived, and be watching their departure, unable to intervene, as he had no warrant for arrest, or any definite knowledge that the yacht was being used for a criminal purpose. He had not long to wait. Hurrying steps echoed along the deck; a voice shouted out some order, and the end of a loosened rope dropped splashing into the water astern; the boat trembled to the pulsations of the engine, and West realized that it was at first slowly, then more swiftly, slipping away into the broad water. Already he could perceive the white wake astern, and, an instant later, as the turn to the right widened, he had a glimpse of the pier, already separated from him by a broad expanse of trembling water. Above the noise his voice would scarcely reach that distance. A crowd of people stood there watching, clinging along the edge of the promenade—McAdams was not among them. It would be useless to strive to attract their attention; not one among them would comprehend; even if they did, not one of them could help. He still stood there, gazing back at the fast receding pier, gradually becoming blurred in the distance, but hopelessly. He knew now he must face his fate alone.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE FATE OF A PRISONER

THE *Seminole* headed straight out into the lake, its course evidently a little to the north of east. The steady throb of the engine exhibited no lack of power, the snowy wake behind telling of rapid progress. There was a distinct swell to the water, increasing as they advanced, but not enough to seriously retard speed, the sharp bow of the yacht cutting through the waves like the blade of a knife, the broken water churning along the sides. West clung to his perch, peering out through the open port, watching the fast disappearing shore line in the giant curve from the Municipal Pier northward to Lincoln Park. In spite of the brightness overhead, there must have been fog in the air, for that distant view quickly became obscure and then as suddenly vanished altogether. There remained no sign of land in sight; only the seemingly limitless expanse of blue water, not so much as a trail of smoke breaking the encircling rim of the sky.

Except for the occasional tread of feet on the deck above, and the faint call of a voice giving orders, the yacht seemed deserted, moving unguided across the waste of waters. No sound of movement or speech reached West's ears from the cabin, and he settled down into moody forgetfulness, still staring dully out through the open port. What was to be, would be, but there was nothing for him to do but wait for those who held him prisoner, to act. He was still seated there, listless, incapable even of further thought, when the door was suddenly unlocked. He had barely time to arise to his feet, when the man with the red moustache stepped within, facing him, as he pushed tightly shut the door behind. The fellow's eyes saw the severed rope on the floor, and he smiled, kicking the strands aside contemptuously.

"Smart enough for that, were you?" he asked. "Well, I would have taken them off myself, if I had thought about it. How did you manage? Oh, I see; rather a bright trick, old man. Feeling pretty fit, are you?"

West did not answer at once; this fellow had come with an object in mind, and his only desire was to baffle him. It was to be a contest of wits, and helpless as the prisoner was physically, he had no intention of playing into the other's hands.

"I might be, if I knew what all this meant," he said at last. "Haven't you got hold of the wrong party?"

The man laughed, standing where he blocked all passage.

"I might have been convinced that I had an hour ago," he answered coldly. "But since then I find I've made rather a good bet. I have the honour of addressing Captain West, I believe?"

"You have the name correct; there is no reason why I should deny that. Unfortunately, I do not know with whom I am conversing."

"Quite easily remedied. I am Joe Hogan, commonly called 'Red' Hogan. The moniker means nothing to you."

"I never heard it before."

"I thought not, which merely proves you are not a 'fly-cop,' only a measly busy-body sticking your nose into some one else's business. Well, we know how to take care of your kind, and this is likely to prove the last case you'll dabble in for a while, my man."

"What does that mean—a threat?"

"Never mind what it means; it is a straight tip. Now listen, West—Captain West I believe is the proper term of address—and you will understand better. When I got you in here I had no real

knowledge as to who you were. I merely took a chance on what Mary had to say, and she twigged you at once. She's smart, that woman; never forgets a face. She sure did a good job this time. But after you were locked in safe, and nobody knew what had happened, and you certainly handled easily enough, I slipped ashore into the restaurant and called up Jim Hobart on the wire. Did he give me your pedigree? He did. Jim was about the happiest guy in the town when he learned we had you bottled. Raised hell last night, didn't you? All right, my friend, you are going to pay the piper today. What got you into this muss, anyhow? You are no relation to the Coolidge girl, are you?"

"None whatever; merely a friend."

"Friend, hey! Well, she's a good looker; so this friendship stuff is easily accounted for. Friend, hell!" he laughed. "You must have it bad to put on all these stunts for sweet friendship's sake. You wouldn't even quit when she told you to."

"I believed she was compelled to say what she did to me," replied West quietly. "That she was in Hobart's power, afraid of her life. There was no other explanation of her strange action possible."

"Is that so?"

"I am willing to listen to such an explanation, Hogan, and if satisfied she really wishes me to keep out of the affair, I will."

"And if not?"

"Then I am going to fight in her cause to the very end of things. You cannot frighten me; your only chance to influence my action is to make things clear. I confess I have been fighting in the dark, not even comprehending your purpose. I do know that the main stake your gang is after is the Coolidge fortune; that, in order to get hold of it, you are obliged to keep control over Miss Natalie. But I can conceive no reason why she should assist in the conspiracy. She certainly cannot be benefited by having her own fortune stolen. This is what puzzles me, but it hasn't changed my loyalty to her. I still believe in her, and feel that she is simply a victim of circumstances beyond her control. Am I frank enough?"

"Sure; it all means you intend to remain a blunder-headed fool defending a girl who does not desire any defence—a Don Quixote tilting at wind-mills. That is your choice, is it?"

"Unless you care to explain clearly just how Miss Natalie's interests are being protected."

"Which I am not at liberty to do at present.

She is satisfied, and has practically told you so, according to Jim Hobart. If you will not accept her word, there is no use of my saying anything about the matter. Besides, West, frankly I don't give a damn what you think. We've got you safe enough, where you can't do anything, even if you want to—so, why worry? Twenty-four hours more will finish our little job, and, until that time is up, you'll remain right here; after that we don't care where in hell you go, or what you do—the game will have been played."

The man's tone, and air of confidence was impressive; beyond doubt he felt that the cards were all in his hands. West drew in his breath sharply.

"Apparently you are right," he said quietly. "May I ask a question or two?"

"Fire away; I'll answer as I please."

"Who is the woman on board?"

"Mary, you mean? Hobart's wife."

"She came from the place on Wray Street last night in an auto?"

"Yes; I brought her along myself."

"Alone?"

"There were two of us, Mark and I—why? what are you driving at?"

"Just putting some broken threads together. Then Natalie Coolidge is not on this yacht?"

"I should say not. What would we be doing with her out here?"

"Where is she then?"

"Oh, I begin to see what brought you aboard so easily, West. You thought we had the lady kidnapped, and was sailing off with her. Some stunt that. What put the idea in your head?"

West hesitated a moment, but decided a truthful answer would do no harm.

"I knew an automobile had driven out of the alley back of Mike's Place; and that a woman was in it. When I got away a little later, I picked up a message—a note which had been dropped. It was written in a woman's hand but unsigned—"

"The little cat! She dropped it?"

"It seems so. You forgot yourself that time. So she was with you, was she?"

"I don't know what you mean. I told you who were with me. Go on; what did the note say?"

"It was only a request for the police to search the *Seminole* at once."

"Oh, that's the way the wind blows. But you preferred to tackle the job yourself. I am certainly obliged to you, West."

"You have no reason to be. I took that note to the police, and they are on the case. They

are combing the city right now for Hobart, and if they get him, this bubble of yours is likely to be pricked."

"Hell, they won't get him. There isn't a fly-cop in Chicago who could locate Jim in a week, and as for Natalie, believe me she is quite able to take care of herself."

"But where is she?"

"At home, of course, if you must know—'Fairlawn,' isn't that the name of the place? We left her there on our way to Jackson Park."

"Then the girl was with you?"

"Spilled the beans, didn't I? That comes from talking too much. However, there is no harm done. Sure she left with us, but we dropped her out at Fairlawn. It was her machine we were riding in. Say, you've questioned me about enough, so let up. Listen now—you will stay in this stateroom until we get ready to let you out. Don't try any funny business either, for if you do, you are going to get hurt. There is a guard outside in the cabin, and we are not afraid to shoot out here on the lake. Nobody knows where you are, West; so if you want to live, keep quiet—that's my advice."

He started back, one hand on the knob of the door, but West stopped him.

"Do you mind telling me where we are bound?" he questioned.

Hogan smiled, but the smile was not altogether a pleasant one.

"You will have to wait, and find that out for yourself, Captain. My orders are not to talk."

"From Hobart?"

"Sure; Jim is engineering this deal, and whatever he says goes, for he's the guy who has his hands on the dough—see?"

He slipped out, closing and locking the door behind him. West, more thoroughly confused than ever over the situation in which he found himself, paced the brief length of the narrow stateroom, and then paused to stare moodily out of the port. His eyes rested on the same wide expanse of water, no longer brightened by the glow of the sun. A mass of clouds veiled the sky, while a floating bank of fog obscured the horizon, limiting the scope of his vision. Everything appeared grey and desolate, and the restless surge of waves were crested with foam. It was hard to judge just where the sun was, yet he had an impression the vessel had veered to the north, and was proceeding straight up the lake, already well out of sight from either shore.

He had learned little of the slightest value;

merely that Natalie had been of the party leaving in the automobile the night before. She, undoubtedly, had been the one who had dropped the note. Then, in spite of all they said about her, in spite of what she had told him, she was actually a prisoner, desperately begging for assistance to escape. As to the other things Hogan had told him, the probability was they were mostly lies. West did not believe the girl had returned to "Fairlawn," the story did not sound natural. If she had written that note, these fellows would never trust her alone, where she could communicate with friends. They might venture to send her in to talk with him, knowing her every word was overheard, but surely they would never be reckless enough to leave her free to act as she pleased. That was unthinkable. Besides why should they have taken this yacht, and sailed it out secretly in the night unless she was hidden away aboard? The only conceivable object would be to thus keep her safely beyond sight and hearing. And that would be a reason why Hobart's wife should also be on board—to look after the girl. The longer he thought it all over, the more thoroughly was he convinced they were both prisoners on the same vessel. Yet what could he do? There was no answer forthcoming; no possibility of breaking forth from that room

was apparent; he was unarmed, helpless. If he did succeed in breaking through the door, he would only encounter an armed guard, and pit himself against five or six men, criminals probably, who would count his death a small matter compared to their own safety. He sank down, with head in his hands, totally unnerved—it was his fate to attempt nothing; only to wait on fortune.

Mark brought in food, merely opening the door slightly, and sliding the tray in on the floor. No words were exchanged, nor was the tray removed until just at twilight, when the fellow appeared again on a similiar mission. It became dark, but no light was furnished. Outside the clouds had thickened, and a heavy swell was tossing the vessel about rather roughly. Seemingly the engine was merely endeavouring to maintain head-way, with no port in immediate prospect; they were steering aimlessly into the promise of a stormy night. No sound reached him from the cabin, and finally, worn out mentally and physically, West flung himself on the lower bunk, and lay there motionless, staring up into the intense darkness.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SINKING YACHT

LYING there motionless, yet wide awake, his senses alert, every slightest sound and movement made clearer the situation. He could feel the laboured efforts of the vessel, the slap of waves against the side, the rush of water astern. Occasionally the echo of a voice reached him from the deck above, and once footsteps were audible almost over his head. The engine strokes were regular, but slow, the vibrations shaking the boat in its sturdy battling against the forces of the sea. The *Seminole* rolled heavily, yet there was nothing at all alarming in her actions, and West felt no premonition of illness, or fear as to the sea-worthiness of the little craft. Whoever was handling her was evidently a seaman, quite capable of conquering a storm of this magnitude. No noise came to him from the cabin, yet he had no thought it could be deserted. Hogan would certainly retain a guard there, and probably others—with no duties of seamanship weighing on them—

would seek refuge there from the wind-swept deck above. No doubt the fellows had a skipper, as neither Hogan, nor the man Mark, bore any resemblance to a lake sailor. Quite possibly the entire crew were innocent of what was actually transpiring aboard, and equally indifferent, so long as their wages were satisfactory. Yet it was even more probable that they had been selected for this special service because of lack of ordinary scruples; men who would never question so long as the pay was adequate for the danger involved.

It seemed to West the wind and sea were slowly decreasing in violence; there was less noise and turmoil. The movement of the vessel began to lull him into forgetfulness, his vigilance relapsed, his mind drifting in thought. He endeavoured to arouse himself, to keep awake, but finally fatigue conquered, and he sank into a deep sleep. He had no knowledge of how long this slumber lasted, or what suddenly awakened him, so startled at the moment that he sat up in the berth, staring into the blackness. Was it a dream, or a reality? Had some one spoken? He could neither see nor hear anything; the boat seemed to be motionless, not even throbbing now to the beat of the engine—the silence was uncanny. It seemed to him his own heart had stopped, so still

it was, and he felt a cold perspiration break out on his flesh. Something was wrong, must be wrong. Where were they—at anchor in some harbour? or helplessly adrift on the lake? The sea must have gone down; waves no longer dashed against the side, and there was no shriek of wind overhead; the yacht rocked gently, as though the swell of the sea no longer buffeted her; there was no sound of action on the deck above. Then he heard a voice again, outside, reaching him this time plainly through the open port.

"All set, Mapes," it said sharply. "Come on down. You finished the job?"

"Ay, ay, sir," the answer gruff, but with a tinge of excitement in the tone. "She's fixed all right. Hold hard, now, mate."

West, thoroughly aroused, realizing instantly the importance of this new move, and as quickly suspecting its purpose, leaped to the port-hole, and, endeavoured to gain a glimpse without. The night was still intensely black, the sky overcast and starless, the only glimmer of light the reflecting of foam tipped surges. If land was near it remained invisible, nor could he even be sure of the close proximity of a boat. There seemed to be a smudge there at the left, a black, lumping shadow, shapeless against the background of sea;

yet he could not be sure. Even as he gazed at it doubtfully, the dim object disappeared, fading away like a mirage. No sound reached him to cause the vision to seem real—no voice, no creak of oars, no flap of a sail; yet something told him that mysterious shadow was a boat, a boat filled with men, creeping away silently into the night, fleeing from the yacht, and vanishing into the darkness.

My God, what could such action mean? Why were these fellows deserting the *Seminole*, leaving him helpless aboard, locked into that stateroom? Was the yacht disabled? sinking? and had they merely forgotten him in their own eagerness to escape? Were they in mid-lake? or close to some point of land? Had every one gone, leaving the vessel totally abandoned, a wreck buffeted by the surges, doomed to go down, unseen, its final fate unknown? Unknown! The word rising to his brain was the answer. There was the crest of the plot. What could be easier, or safer, than this ending? Who would ever know the truth? Who could ever prove anything, even if they suspected? And who was there to suspect?

No one had reason to believe he was aboard the *Seminole;* not even McAdams. If it was to their

interest to get him permanently out of the way—if Hobart had so decided—what simpler method could be found than the sinking of the yacht? The very crew might be innocent of the purpose, dupes of the conspiracy; they might even be unaware of his presence aboard, and deceived by Hogan into the belief that the vessel had opened a seam, and must sink shortly, would take to the boat without suspecting any one was left behind. They could so testify in all honesty if any question ever arose. The very simplicity of the scheme meant safety; yet the possibility of such cold blooded murder had never before occurred to him. Unknown! without a trace left; only a boat crew landing somewhere on the coast at dawn, and scattering to the four winds. It was a plot infernal.

West stopped, his hands clinched, his heart seeming to stop its pulsing. But if Natalie Coolidge was also prisoner on board, what of her? Wasn't that the very thing most probable? Of course it was; how foolish he had been. These men, recklessly criminal, as they were, would never sacrifice the yacht, and risk their own lives, merely to put him out of the way. He was not important enough for that; he was but an incident. It was an accident which had made him a prisoner.

While this was—must be—a carefully arranged plan. The girl then must be the real victim; his own plight arose merely because he chanced to be there, and the villains dare not leave him alive to tell the story.

The certainty of this acted like an electric shock. He had not felt seriously alarmed before as to his own fate. He had only been conscious of a deep anger, a mad determination to make Hogan pay. If the *Seminole* was sinking, and beyond doubt this was the intention of those deserters, it was going down slowly, so slowly there would be ample time for escape. He was not asleep, but wide awake, and far from paralyzed by the danger. He was not the sort to give up while there was any hope left. Surely the guard in the cabin would have departed with the others, leaving him free to act. He could smash his way out through that door, and find something on deck to construct a raft from. This was Lake Michigan, not the ocean, and not many hours would pass before he was picked up. Vessels were constantly passing, and daylight would bring rescue.

But now the task became difficult. He must find the girl, and serve her. To his surprise, his heart beat rapidly in contemplation of the task. Surely she must welcome his coming to her assist-

ance now. She would be alone, free to reveal the truth of all this strange mix-up of affairs; perhaps the old trust, the old confidence between them would be renewed. At least in the midst of such peril, alone on the sinking yacht, facing possible death together, he would again discover the real Natalie Coolidge. The hope instantly inspired action. Every minute might mean life or death; the work must be accomplished now, if ever. The *Seminole* was evidently deserted, the boat containing the fleeing crew already far enough away to be beyond sound of any noise he might make. He already felt the wallowing of the deck beneath his feet, a dead, dull feeling, evidence enough that the deserted vessel was slowly, but surely going down. The condition could not last long; faster and faster the water would seep into her hold, until suddenly, without warning, perhaps, she must go down like a stone.

All these thoughts flashed across his mind almost in an instant; there was no hesitancy, no waste of time. His eager eyes searched the narrow confines of the stateroom for some possible weapon with which to assail the door. The stout stool alone seemed available. Swinging this over his shoulder, hampered by the narrowness of space, he struck again and again, with all his

strength, the upper panel splintering beneath the third crashing blow. He could see nothing, but felt with his fingers along the jagged ends of the shattered wood, and redoubled his efforts, striking wildly, but with effect, until suddenly the lock gave, and the door burst open. He was in the main cabin, which was unlit and deserted. Standing there confused in the grim silence, unable for the instant to determine how to advance in the dark, he could hear the rapid beating of his own heart, and the continuous lap of waves outside. God! how sodden the deck felt under foot; what a sickening swell hurled the craft, and such stillness! If the girl was aboard why did she not cry out? Surely she must have heard that noise, the rain of blows, the crunch of wood.

He stood, crouched, listening intently for something to guide him in the right direction. And yet, even if Natalie had heard, what reason would the girl have to suspect the truth? Likely enough she was sound asleep, completely worn out, and with no knowledge of what had occurred on board. It was only the sound of that voice speaking loudly in the boat alongside which had aroused him. She had no reason to suspect desertion, no occasion to believe any other prisoner than herself was aboard. The noise of crashing wood, even if it

awoke her, would have no special meaning to her mind, only perhaps to add to her terror. He must act alone; there was no other way. If he could only have a light of some kind, and not be compelled to grope blindly about in that intense darkness.

He stepped cautiously forward, with hands outstretched, swaying to the sudden roll of the sinking hulk underneath his feet. He struck a piece of furniture, a bench bolted to the deck, and then his groping fingers came in sudden contact with the cabin wall, which he followed, circling to the left. In this manner he succeeded in finally locating the door opening out on to the deck, and had grasped the knob, when a deep moan from the black void behind caused him to become suddenly erect, his heart beating like a trip-hammer. No other sound followed, no repetition, and yet there could be no mistaking what he had heard. It was a groan, a human groan, emanating from a spot but a few feet away. He took a single step in that direction; then hesitated, fearful of some trap; in the silence as he stood there poised, he could faintly distinguish the sound of some one breathing unnaturally.

"Who is there? Who moaned just now?" he asked, struggling to control his voice.

"I did," the answer was a mere husky whisper out of the darkness. "Masters, the watchman; but who are you? I don't know your voice."

"It makes no difference; are you hurt? Where are you? How can I get a light?"

"Yes, sir; I'm about done for I guess; you're over by the door, ain't you? There's a hangin' lantern just up above, if you've got a match with you. Say, that looks good; I didn't hardly know but I was dead, it was so black. But I never saw you before; how did you get aboard here?"

The flame of the match caught the wick, and flared up, throwing a dim illumination over the cabin interior. West drew down the glass, before he ventured to glance in the direction of the voice. A man lay facing him, curled up on the deck, his hair, matted with blood, hanging over eyes that were burning with fever. He made no attempt to rise, apparently was unable to move, and a dark, bloody stain covered the deck. West sprang forward, and lifted the head on his arm.

"You are hurt—badly?" he exclaimed. "What can I do for you?"

"Nuthin', I reckon," still in that same strained whisper. "I'm done for; no doubt of it. That guy got me. You ain't one o' that murderin' gang, are you?"

"No; I was a prisoner on board; I came here to help a girl."

"A girl! Miss Coolidge you mean, sir?"

"Yes, Natalie Coolidge; do you know anything about her? Where she is?"

"Sure, I know; the damn whelps left her here; that was their dirty game, sir. 'Twas because I tried to unlock her door that Hogan slugged me. The boat's goin' down, ain't it? I know'd it was; I heard the skunks talk about what they was goin' to do, an' then I tried to get her out, sir."

"You were the watchman?"

"Yes, sir; down in the lagoon at Jackson Park. These fellows come off to the yacht about midnight, an' they had Miss Coolidge with 'em. That's what fooled me, sir, an' I let 'em get aboard, thinkin' it must be all right. After that I couldn't do nuthin'—there was six to one, an' that 'Red' Hogan had a gun in his mitt. They hustled me down into the cabin. I didn't even know she was a prisoner until they locked her into a stateroom; then I got wise, but it was too late."

"And she is there yet, Masters? What room is it?"

"The last one to the right, sir. Don't you mind about me; I'm done for, but maybe there's a chance for you two."

CHAPTER XXV

FREE OF THE YACHT

THE man was evidently dying. West, from his experience on European battle-fields, felt assured the end was indeed close at hand. His face under the flitting rays of the swinging light was ghastly and drawn, his words were barely audible, and painfully uttered, while, as the arm supporting his head was withdrawn, he sank back heavily into his former position, and his eyes instantly closed. Only as West bent lower could he determine the surety of his breathing still.

There was nothing to be done for Masters; no occasion for lingering there helplessly. The yacht was sinking under their feet, going down slowly, but surely, and the end could not be far off. The very movement of the vessel sickened him, brought to him a sensation of fear. Moreover he knew the truth now, and saw clearly his duty. The watchman had not told much, but it was sufficient to verify all his former suspicions. These fel-

lows he fought were desperate criminals, playing for high stakes, conspiring to even commit murder to achieve their object—which could be nothing less than gaining possession of the Coolidge fortune. To that end they had coolly planned the sinking of the *Seminole* in mid-lake, with the helpless girl locked securely in her cabin. It was a cowardly, diabolical crime, and yet, no doubt, they had figured it as the safest method of completely disposing of her. And, but for the accident of his presence on board, and his having been awakened by that incautious voice, the foul plot would probably have proven successful. They had already got safely away, leaving her behind a prisoner, her only possible rescuer this watchman wounded unto death. The yacht was sinking in the dark, going steadily down in those night shrouded waters. Who would ever know? The main body of the crew, perhaps, never even dreamed of her presence aboard. There was no evidence, nothing to convict the men really guilty. Here was the scheme of a master-mind in crime.

West weaved his way across the rolling deck of the cabin to the stateroom door Masters had pointed out as the one sheltering the girl. There was no sound from within, nor would the knob yield to his grasp. It was locked, the key gone.

There was no time to wait and hunt for that missing piece of metal doubtless safely hidden in Hogan's pocket, or else thrown overboard; he must break a way in; but first he must explain to her, so as to spare her the sudden fright of such an assault. He rapped sharply on the panel, pausing an instant for a response. None came, and he knocked again more roughly.

"Miss Coolidge: you are there, are you not?"

"Yes; who is that?" almost a cry of delight in the voice. "You—you have a voice I know."

"I am Matthew West; but do not ask questions now. The yacht is going down, and I must break this door in to release you. Stand back while I smash the boards. You hear and understand?"

"Yes—yes: I am safely away; have no fear."

The light revealed the weapon he required just beyond where Masters lay—a heavy hatchet, still stained with blood, probably the very instrument with which the watchman had been brutally struck down. That made no difference now, and West snatched it up, and began to splinter the wood with well directed blows. He worked madly, feverishly, unable to judge there in the cabin whether he had a minute, or an hour, in which to effect

their rescue. All he knew was that every second was worth saving, and with this impulse driving him, swung the sharp blade with all his strength and skill, gouging out great splinters of wood, and finally forcing the lock to yield. He sprang eagerly through the opening, the hatchet still in his grasp, and faced her.

She stood there looking straight at him, seemingly unable even yet to wholly realize the marvellous truth of his presence. The light from the swinging lamp in the big cabin beyond, streamed in through the shattered doorway, and revealed her face, pale, but unafraid, the eyes wide-open, the lips parted. An instant both paused, and then she cried out in sudden relief.

"Oh, it is really you, Captain West. I know now. What has happened? How did you come to be here?"

"Not now," he insisted. "Don't ask me now. Just come as quick as you can. Do you not realize the boat is sinking, going down under our very feet? For all I know it may take the plunge before we can reach the deck. There is no time for anything but action. Quick; let me take your hand."

She obeyed without a word, and he pressed her

before him out through the door into the more brightly lighted cabin. Her eyes opened in horror at the sight of Masters, and she drew back trembling against West's arm.

"Who—who is that? A dead man?"

"I fear so; wait just a second until I learn; if he still lives we cannot leave him here."

West bent over the motionless figure; the flesh was no longer warm; and he could detect no breath. Satisfied, he regained his feet.

"It is all over with," he said gravely. "He is beyond human aid."

"But—but, please, who is he?" she insisted, clinging to his arm. "Surely I have seen the man before; what has happened?"

"He was the watchman on the yacht—Masters he said his name was," West explained impatiently. "He was still alive when I first came, and told me where you were confined. He tried to serve you when the others left, and was struck down by Hogan."

"The others left! Is the boat deserted? Are we here all alone?"

"Yes; the villains left us both locked into staterooms to die. They deserted the yacht, expecting it to sink, and take us both down with it. The craft is near foundering now, and our only hope is

to obtain the open deck at once. Do not question any more, but do just as I say. You trust me, do you not?"

"Trust you! of course I do."

"Then let's talk afterwards. All I can think about now is how best to save your life."

She permitted him to draw her through the door on to the black, deserted deck. For the first moment, as they hesitated there, little could be perceived other than vague shadows. The sky was overcast, but the wind light, yet with sufficient swell to the water to cause the yacht to wallow uncomfortably. West, bracing himself to the sudden plunging, managed to reach the rail. He drew back, sick at heart at the sight of the waves lapping the side almost on a level with the sloping deck on which he stood. The sight brought home to him as never before the drear deadly peril in which they were. It was already a matter of minutes; any second indeed that labouring hulk might take the fatal plunge. The knowledge brought back all his soldier instincts of command, his rough insistence. He would find some means of rescue; he must! He was back instantly, grasping her arm.

"Quick," he cried. "You knew this yacht· what small boats did she carry?"

"Only the one; the other was so warped it had been taken ashore."

"Only one! Those fellows put off in that. There was nothing else to save life aboard?"

"There are life-belts here; see, hung to the front of the cabin. Was that what you meant?"

"Yes, and no." He snatched one from the hook, and hastily strapped it about her. "These may help, but we shall need more. Was there no life-raft? My God! there must surely be something of that kind."

"Yes, there is; I remember now. It is forward there, near the engine-room hatch. Percival Coolidge explained to me how it worked once. But—but I don't believe just the two of us could ever launch it over the rail."

"We will, because we must—it is our only hope. I'll take the other belt; now come. We haven't an instant to waste—the water is even now almost level with the deck; any second we may be awash, and go down like a stone. Hold on tight to me."

The deck was already sloping to port in a dangerous degree, and West was compelled to cling to the rail, as they slowly made passage forward through the darkness. Their eyes had by then

adapted themselves to the night, so as to distinguish larger objects, and, as there was no litter to encounter, as in the case of a ship wrecked by storm, the two progressed safely as far as the engine-hatch. Neither spoke, but West still clasped the hatchet, peering anxiously about for some signs of the life-raft. He located it at last, securely fastened to the side of the deck house, and, leaving the girl to hold herself upright as best she could, began to hack it loose. It was quite an affair, cork-lined, and evidently capable of sustaining considerable weight when once launched in the water, but cumbersome and hard to handle on deck, more particularly because of its awkward form.

Fortunately it hung to the port side with a rather steep slant to the rail, which was not high. The waters of the lake, threatening to engulf them with every sodden roll of the vessel, were almost within reach of an outstretched hand, while occasionally a wave danced along the bulwark, and scattered its spray over the deck. West, working with feverish impatience, realized suddenly that his companion had deserted the place where he had left her and was also tugging and slashing at the lashings of the raft. These finally yielded to their

blind attack. Without the exchange of a word the two grasped the sides and shoved the thing hard down against the port rail.

"Wait now," he cried exultantly. "Stay behind, and brace yourself against the hatch-cover. I'll get underneath and lift. Once on the rail the two of us must shove it free overboard. Here, keep a grip on this line, so the raft can't float away."

She understood instantly, and, with a single swift glance at her dimly revealed figure, West straightened up, bearing the full weight on his shoulders, every muscle strained to the utmost, as he thus pressed it over inch by inch across the wooden barrier. Twice he stopped, breathless, trembling in every limb, seemingly unable to exert another pound of strength. Perspiration dripped from his face, his teeth clinched in desperate determination. At the second pause, she was beside him, pressing her way in also beneath the sagging burden. He felt the pressure of her body.

"No, no; I can make it alone," he panted indignantly.

"Not so well as we both can, working together. I am strong, Captain West. Try it again now, and see."

Suddenly the great unwieldy mass moved, slid

forward, poised itself an instant on the rounded rail. The yacht rolled sharply to port, flinging both on to the deck together, but sending the raft crunching overboard, clear of the side. West grasped her, and dragged her to her feet. His one thought was that they were actually going down, but, even as he held her in his arms, ready to leap out into the black water, the shuddering vessel, with a last despairing effort, partially righted herself, and staggered on.

"The rope," he questioned. "Did you lose grip on the rope?"

"No, it is here. I can feel the jerk of the raft."

"Thank God for that; let's pull it closer to the side. We can't wait to take anything with us; even if I knew where provisions and blankets were, I could never find them in this darkness. I would not dare leave you to search; another dip like that must be the very last. Here, let me hold you up; can you see the raft?"

"Yes; I'm sure it is just below; why I could almost touch it."

"Can you jump to it from the rail? It is either that, or the water. Are you afraid to try?"

"Afraid—no. Hold me; yes; that way, but—but what are you going to do?"

"Follow, of course; but I shall take to the

water. There are no oars here. Nothing to use as a substitute for them. I'll have to swim, and push that old ark as far away as possible. When the yacht goes down, the suction is liable to swamp us, if we are close in."

"But I can swim, Captain West."

"I am glad to know that; but now you do just as I say. There is no necessity for both of us getting wet through. Are you ready?"

She poised herself, held steady by the grip of his hands, her eyes on the dark outline of the floating raft. There was no hesitancy, no questioning.

"Say when," he said sharply.

"Now."

She sprang outward, and came down, sinking to her knees, and clinging fast, as the raft bobbed up and down under her sudden weight, dipping until the water rolled completely over it.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE COMING OF DAWN

WEST leaned far out, and stared off at the faint blotch made by the raft against the water surface. He could perceive little except a bare, shapeless outline.

"Did you make it? Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm safe enough; but wet just the same; the thing bobbed under."

"It will hold us up though, don't you think?"

"Why, of course, it will float; it is supposed to support four people. It rides dry enough now. But—but, Captain West, I want you to come."

"I'm coming; I'll throw my shoes and coat over there to you first. To be rid of them will make swimming easier. Watch out now—good! Now draw in the line; we may need it. Got it all right? Very well; here goes."

He made the plunge, coming up to the surface close beside the raft, the edge of which he quickly grasped with his hands. The girl remained motionless, barely perceptible through the gloom, but

with anxious eyes marking his every movement. The frail support beneath her rose and fell on the swell of the waters, occasionally dipping beneath the surface. Beyond, a grim, black, threatening shadow, wallowed the wreck. West swam steadily, urging the unwieldy raft away from the menacing side of the vessel, driven by the necessity of escaping the inevitable suction when she went down. It was a hard, slow push, the square sides of the raft offering every obstacle to progress. Yet the waves and wind helped somewhat, the raft being lighter than the water-sogged *Seminole*, so that gradually the distance widened, until there extended a considerable waste of water between the two. Exhausted by his exertion, and breathing hard, West glanced back over his shoulder at the dimmer shadow of the yacht, now barely revealed against the clouded sky. The bulk of it seemed scarcely visible in any defined form above the level of the sea—the end must be almost at hand.

Satisfied that they were far enough away for safety, he clambered cautiously upon the platform, the girl as carefully making room for him on the few dry planks. The raft tossed dizzily under the strain, but he made it at last, the water draining from his soaked clothing, his flesh shivering at

the touch of the cool night air. He sat up, his limbs braced to hold him erect, glancing aside at her, wondering at her continued silence. Even in the darkness she must have known his eyes were searching her face.

"You are cold," she said, doubtfully. "Here is your coat, and I have kept it dry—no, really, I do not need it; I am quite warmly dressed."

He threw the garment over his wet shoulders, gratefully, and the two sat there very close together, staring back at the labouring *Seminole*. There was nothing to say, nothing to do; for the moment at least they were safe, and perhaps morning would bring rescue. Suddenly West straightened up, aroused by a new interest—surely that last wave went entirely over the yacht's rail; he could see the white gleam of spray as it broke; and, yes, there was another! Unconsciously his hand reached out and clasped that of his companion. She made no effort to draw away, and they sat there in awed silence, watching this weird tragedy of the sea, with bodies braced to meet the bobbing of the unwieldly support beneath them.

At first the labouring vessel seemed to hold its own, fighting desperately to remain afloat, a mere shadow above the surface. Then, almost without

warning, the end came. She went down bow first, the stern lifting until West could discern the dark outlines of the screw, and then dropped like a stone, vanishing almost instantly. One moment she was there; the next had disappeared, the black waters closing over. There was but little evidence of what occurred; only a deeper swell, tossing the raft giddily about for a moment, and causing West to tighten his grip on the girl's hand. She gave utterance to a half-smothered cry, and her body dropped forward as though she would hide the scene from her eyes.

"That is the last of the *Seminole*," West said, feeling the necessity of strengthening her. "But it is nothing to frighten you. We are safe enough here."

"Oh, it is not that," she explained hastily, lifting her head, and facing him. "I—I do not think I am frightened. I have not broken down before, but—but I thought then of that dead man lying there all alone in the dark cabin. It seemed so terrible when the yacht sank. Please do not find fault with me."

"That was not why I spoke. But you must keep your nerve; we may be afloat for hours yet before we are picked up."

"You are sure we will be?"

"The probability is altogether in our favour," he insisted, as much to encourage himself as her. "This is Lake Michigan in summer time, and boats are plying everywhere. We shall surely be sighted by something when daylight returns. There is no sign of a storm brewing, and all we need do now is hold on."

She was silent a moment, with head again bent forward.

"What do you suppose became of the men who deserted the yacht?" she asked, her voice natural and quiet.

"Ashore, perhaps, by this time."

"Then we cannot be far away from land?"

"I have no means of knowing. Probably not, if they relied upon oars."

"Why should they? There was a mast and sails stowed in the boat; they were always kept there for an emergency." She lifted her eyes, and stared about into the gloom. "Do you suppose, Captain West, they could have remained nearby to make sure the yacht sank?"

"No, I do not," he said firmly. "I thought of that once myself; but it is not at all probable. They were too certain they had done a good job,

and too eager to get away safely. Hogan never deemed it possible for us to get away alive. As it was, the escape was almost a miracle."

"A miracle!" softly. "Perhaps so, yet I know who accomplished it. I owe my life to you, Captain West," she paused doubtfully, and then went on impulsively. "Won't you explain to me now what it all means? How you came to be here? and—and why those men sought in this way to kill me?"

"You do not know?"

"Only in the vaguest way; is it my fortune? I have been held prisoner; lied to, and yet nothing has been made clear. This man who went down in the cabin—you said he died trying to save me?"

"Yes; he endeavoured to release you from the stateroom, and was caught by Hogan. In the struggle he received a death wound."

"I heard them fight. This Hogan then was the leader?"

"Of those on board—yes. But he is only the tool of others. This devilish conspiracy has been plotted for a long while. There must be a dozen involved in it, one way or another, but, as near as I can learn, the chief devil, the brains of the gang, is the fellow named Hobart. Have you known him—long?"

She hesitated, and West glanced aside wonderingly. Would she venture to deny her knowledge of the man?

"No," she said at last doubtfully, "not unless his other name was Jim. There was a fellow they called Jim. He was my jailor after that woman locked me into a room."

"A woman? The same one who was with you on the yacht?"

"Yes."

"Where was this?"

"Why surely you must know. In that cottage where we stopped with Percival Coolidge."

He drew a deep breath, more thoroughly puzzled than ever. What could be her purpose to make so bold an effort to deceive? Did she imagine for a moment that he could be made to believe she had been continuously held prisoner since that Sunday morning? It was preposterous. Why, he had seen her again and again with his own eyes; had talked with her, and so had Sexton. His heart sank, but he determined to go on, and learn how far she would carry this strange tale. Perhaps out of the welter he could discern some truth.

"The fellow's name is Jim, all right, Jim Hobart. I've looked him up in the police records. He is a confidence man, with one charge of assault

with attempt to kill against him. Nothing lately, however; it seems he disappeared about ten years ago, and has just drifted back. The woman passes as his wife. You knew nothing of all this?"

"No; I only saw the man twice; he was very rough then, and swore when I questioned him."

"And the woman?"

"She would not talk either; only once she told me that Percival Coolidge had committed suicide. That made me wonder, for I believed he had something to do with my being held there. What did he say when he returned to the auto without me? What explanation did he make for my absence?"

"Explanation! He needed none; you came out of the cottage with him."

"I? What do you mean?"

"But I saw you with my own eyes, talked with you, and all three of us drove back to 'Fairlawn' together. My God, Miss Natalie, have you lost your mind? Do you even deny dismissing me from your service?"

She gazed at him through the gloom, utterly unable to comprehend.

"I must have, if what you say is true," she admitted, "For I certainly have no such recollection."

"You remember nothing of going back with us to 'Fairlawn'?"

"Absolutely nothing."

"Or of a conversation had with me later in the library?"

"No, Captain West."

He stared off into the black night, his lips pressed closely together. Could this be false? Could she sit there calmly, in the midst of such peril as surrounded them, and still deliberately endeavour to deceive?

"And you knew nothing of the death of Percival Coolidge, except what was told you by that woman?"

"She brought me a newspaper which I read; that was all I knew."

"And in that house on Wray Street where I met you again last night. I suppose you were not there either?"

"Wray Street? I do not know; I was at some place with a saloon on the ground floor. I could not tell you where it was."

"That is where it was—Wray Street, on the northwest side, a thieves' rendezvous. And you talked with me there; tried to get me to quit following you. You surely haven't forgotten that already?"

She dropped her face wearily into her hands, and her voice sounded listless.

"I—I almost believe you are the crazy one, Captain West. I swear I have never knowingly met, or spoken to you since we drove to that cottage on Sunday. I cannot believe what you say."

"Yet it is true, every word true"; he asserted stoutly. "Why else should I be here? You returned with us to 'Fairlawn,' and we chatted together pleasantly all the way. Later you seemed to change, and discharged me rather rudely. Then Percival Coolidge was killed—shot down by an assassin, not a suicide. I know because I found the body. You were at the inquest, and testified. I saw you with my own eyes. The next day you discharged Sexton, and later he learned, and reported to me, that some one called you on the phone from Wray Street, and wanted you to come over there at once."

"Was that why you went there?"

"Yes; I felt something was wrong; the killing of Percival Coolidge had aroused my suspicions; and I sought to learn who those people were you had visited in the cottage. They were gone, and only for this telephone call, I should have lost the trail entirely. I found you there, and this fellow Hobart with you."

"But, Captain West, I never saw you; I never left the room in the third story where I was locked in, except when they took me away in a machine to the yacht."

"You dropped a note in the alley, enclosed in a silver knife?"

"Yes, I did. I dared not hope it would be found, but I took the chance. Did you find it?"

"Sexton did, and that was what brought me here."

"But it is all so strange," she exclaimed despairingly. "How could I have done all these things, been in all these places, and yet know nothing about it? Could I have been drugged? or influenced in some way by those people? I have read there is such a power—where one person can make another obey absolutely, with no knowledge of what he is doing; what do they call that?"

"Hypnotism. I have seen it cut some odd capers; but I do not believe you were either hypnotized or drugged. Good God; why did I not think of this solution before? I must have been blind; that was not you; I can recall a hundred little things now to convince me."

"What is it you mean?"

"Another woman played your part; a woman

most wonderfully like you, even to the voice. There is no other solution of the problem. And that reveals the plan of robbery—to get you out of the way, and then have her take the fortune. Who would ever suspect such a fraud?"

She sat silent, motionless, apparently unable at once to grasp all the meaning in his words. It seemed unbelievable, and her gaze was straight out across the black waters, one hand clinging firmly to offset the rocking of the frail raft. Then she pointed away into the distance.

"See, there is light over there," she exclaimed eagerly. "That must be the east, and it is morning."

CHAPTER XXVII

LOVE BREAKS SILENCE

WEST was so immersed in his own thoughts, awakened by these new developments, he apparently did not hear what the girl said. She reached out and pressed his arm.

"Do you not see, Captain West? Daylight is coming; it is much lighter over there."

He lifted his head, and looked where she pointed. A dull, grey light topped the waters, and the sky above held a faint tinge of crimson. The wan glow accented the loneliness, and for the moment left him depressed. Was there ever a more sombre scene than was presented by that waste of tumbling waves, stretching to the horizon, arched over by a clouded sky? It grew clearer, more distinct, yet remained the same dead expanse of restless water, on which they tossed helplessly and alone. Nothing broke the grimness of it, not even a bird in the air, or a leaping fish; complete desolation met the eye in every direction, a threaten-

ing, menacing dreariness amid which each approaching swell seemed about to sweep them to destruction. The wind increased slightly with the dawn, buffeting the frail raft to which they clung desperately, and showering them with spray, while, as the light became stronger, they searched vainly for any sign of ship, or shadow of land. Nothing appeared within range of vision to break the drear monotony of grey sea and sky. Neither felt any desire to speak; they could only stare out silently across the desolation of waters, feeling their helplessness and peril. This then was the morning they had struggled forward to—this green, grey monster, whose dripping jaws showered wet foam over them; this terrible nothingness which promised death.

Her head sank forward into her hands, as though she would thus shut out the whole weird picture, and West, aroused by the slight movement, glanced quickly aside. The sight of her distress gave him instant mastery over his own depression. His hand sought her own, where it gripped for support, and closed over it warmly.

"It cannot be as bad as it seems," he insisted, trying to say the words cheerfully. "I know these waters, and they are never long deserted. Luck will change surely; perhaps within the hour we

shall be picked up, and can laugh at all this experience."

She lifted her head, and their eyes met frankly.

"I am not afraid," she protested. "Not physically, at least. Truly I have not felt fear since you joined me, Captain West. Before that I was alone, and was frightened because I could not in the least understand why I was being held a prisoner, or what my fate was to be. Now all I must meet is the danger of the sea, with you to share the peril with me."

"But you are very tired?"

"Perhaps so, yet I have not thought about that. There are other things; you do not believe in me."

"Why say that?" he asked in astonishment. "There is no question of the kind between us now."

"Truly, is there not? There has been, however; I know from the way you spoke. What was it you believed of me—that—that I was part of this conspiracy?"

"I do not know what I believed, if I actually believed anything, Miss Natalie," he explained rather lamely. "I cannot make the situation altogether clear even to myself. You see I kept meeting and talking with you—or I thought I did—and yet never found you to be the same. I

was all at sea, unable to get anything straight. One moment I was convinced of your innocence; the next something occurred to make you appear guilty, a co-conspirator with Jim Hobart. Under the circumstances, you cannot condemn me justly."

"Condemn! I do not. How could I? You must have kept faith in me nevertheless, or you would never be here now. That is what seems marvellous to me—that you actually cared enough to believe."

"I realize now that I have," he said gravely. "Through it all I have kept a very large measure of faith in you."

"Why should that faith have survived?" she questioned persistently, as though doubt would not wholly leave her mind, "we had no time to really know each other; only a few hours at the most, and even then you must have deemed me a strange girl to ask of you what I did. Surely there was never a madder story told than the one I told you, and I couldn't have proven an item of it."

"Yet it has shown itself true," he interrupted.

"You actually believe then that there is another woman—a counterfeit of myself?"

"It is the only theory feasible; you have convinced me of that."

"Yet this does not answer my question alto-

gether. You are convinced now, perhaps, because you accept my word, but how have you kept faith in me when you believed just as strongly that it was actually I who met and talked with you? I who was playing in the game with the man Hobart?"

"Will you believe what I say?"

"Implicitly."

"Perhaps it sounds like a fairy tale," he spoke frankly, his eyes seeking her own, all their surroundings forgotten in the eagerness of the moment, "but I will tell you the exact truth. Before this misunderstanding occurred you had confided in me, trusted me, although I was a stranger and I believed absolutely in your story. I had that basis to rest on. In addition to this, those few hours I passed at 'Fairlawn' served to confirm my faith. I got hold of various odds and ends of evidence which convinced me that something was wrong—that you were actually being conspired against. I even gained a suspicion that Percival Coolidge was the actual leader of the conspiracy."

"Percival Coolidge! but why? What could he gain by such a crime?"

"I have not found the answer yet, but my conviction remains strong—stronger, indeed, than ever since our talk last night. You could never

have been made prisoner in that cottage without his connivance; he must have lured you there for that particular purpose, so that this other girl could take your place without danger of discovery. It was a neat trick, so well done as to even deceive me. The reason for Percival's participation is only a guess, but my theory is the fellow had so juggled your fortune, and the time for final accounting was so near, he had to take a desperate chance in order to save himself."

"You mean the opportunity came, and he could not resist?"

"Perhaps so, and perhaps it was his own deliberate plan. That remains to be discovered. My own theory is that when Hobart learned what Percival Coolidge proposed doing, his own criminal tendencies told him that here was some easy money. The girl was undoubtedly wholly under his control; some denizen of the underworld probably. She had already played her part sufficiently well to convince Hobart of success. Why then, shouldn't he have this money instead of Percival? There was no reason except that Percival was in the way. That was why he was killed."

"By Hobart?"

"He may not have fired the shot, but I have no doubt he inspired it; and the job was so ex-

pertly done the coroner called it suicide. The way was open; you were a prisoner, and the false Natalie Coolidge safely installed as mistress of 'Fairlawn.' No one apparently suspected anything wrong."

"And," she questioned breathlessly, "the man meant to murder me also?"

"Not at that time in my judgment," West answered thoughtfully. "Such an additional crime was not a part of the original plan. There was no apparent necessity. Your estate was about to be settled finally, and given over to your control in accordance with the terms of your father's will. Hobart must have known all this from Percival Coolidge, and exactly what steps must be taken to secure it. Once the money, and other property, were delivered to the fake Natalie, the cashing in and get away would be easy; even the identity of the thieves would be concealed. Killing you was not at all necessary to the success of their scheme."

"But they did try to kill me."

"Yes, later, by the sinking of the yacht. Probably I am largely responsible for that."

"You?"

"Yes; the persistency with which I stuck to the trail. They became frightened. My appearance

in Wray Street must have been quite a shock, and when I succeeded in escaping from their trap there, Hobart very evidently lost his head completely. He did not dare risk my ever finding you. The knowledge that I was free, perhaps in communication with the police, led to your night trip to the *Seminole*, and the secret sinking of the yacht. He had gone too far by then to hesitate at another murder."

She waited breathlessly for him to go on, her eyes on the tumbling waste of water. He remained quiet, motionless, and she turned toward him expectantly.

"I—I think I understand now," she admitted, "how all this occurred; but why—why were you so persistent? There—there must have been a reason more impelling than a vague suspicion?"

"There was—the most compelling impulse in the world."

"You mean faith in me?"

"Even more than that; love for you. Natalie, listen; what I have to say may sound strange, cruel even under such conditions as now surround us, but you force me to say them. I love you, have loved you all the time, without fully realizing exactly what it meant. There have been times when I have doubted you, when I could not wholly

escape the evidence that you were also concerned personally in this fraud. I have endeavoured to withdraw from the case, to forget, and blot everything from memory. But something stronger than will prevented; I could not desert you; could not believe you were wilfully wrong. You understand what I mean."

"Yes," the words barely reaching him. "It was the other girl; she undermined your faith."

"That is the truth; yet how could it be, do you suppose? My very love should have enabled me to detect the difference. I can see now, thinking back, where the fraud was even apparent—in mood, temper, action—and yet at the time these made no such impression. Even Sexton never questioned her identity; in face, figure, dress the resemblance was absolutely perfect. Good heavens, but she is an actress!"

She touched his arm with her hand, and under the slight pressure he looked aside at her.

"You know now," she said softly, "and I know. All this is passed and gone between us. We are here alone, the sport of the waves, and I have no reason to be other than frank. I believe in you, Matthew West; in your honesty and manhood. You say you love me?"

"With all my heart and soul; it seems to me now

I have always loved you—you came to me, the lady of my dreams."

Her eyes were wet with unshed tears, yet she smiled back into his face, her voice trembling as she answered.

"And I," she said slowly, "have had no thought but of you since our morning in the garden together. How far away that seems."

"You mean you love me?"

"Yes; I love you; there is no word stronger, but I would speak it—is that not enough?"

He held her in his arms, in spite of the trembling raft, tossed by the swell of the sea, and crushed her against him in the ardent strain of passion. An instant she held her head back, her eyes gazing straight into his; then, with sigh of content, yielded, and their lips met, and clung.

The very silence aroused them, startled both into a swift realization of that dreary waste in which they floated helplessly alone, a drifting chip on the face of the waters. Her eyes swept the crest of the waves, and she withdrew herself partially from his arms.

"Why, we must be crazed to dream of happiness here," she exclaimed. "Was there ever before so strange a confession of love? I am trying

to be brave—but—but that is too much; that waste of green water, with the grey sky overhead. There is no ending to it—just death mocking us in every wave. Oh, Matthew, can this be all? Only this little moment, and then—the end?"

He held her hands tightly, his heart throbbing, but his courage and hope high.

"No, dear," he whispered eagerly. "Don't think that for a moment. We have passed through too much to dream of such an ending now. There will be ships—there must be. Look! what is that, yonder against the sky-line? It is, sweetheart; it is the smoke of a steamer."

CHAPTER XXVIII

AN ESCAPE FROM THE RAFT

THEY watched with sinking hearts, West rising to his knees, and shading his eyes with his hand, as that thin spiral of smoke crept along the horizon, and finally disappeared into the north. The raft rode so low in the water that no glimpse of the distant steamer could be perceived, and, when the last faint vestige of smoke vanished, neither said a word, but sat there silent, with clasped hands. The bitterness of disappointment wore away slowly, and as the uneventful hours left them in the same helpless condition, they fell again into fitful conversation, merely to thus bolster up courage, and lead their minds to other thoughts. It was maddening to sit there motionless and stare off across the desolate water, seeing nothing but those white-crested surges sweeping constantly toward them, and to feel the continuous leap and drop of the frail raft, which alone kept them afloat.

The hours went by monotonously, with scarcely an occurrence to break the dreariness or bring a ray of hope. The clouds obscured the sky, yet occasionally through some narrow rift, came a glimpse of the sun, as it rose to the zenith, and then began sinking into the west. The air was soft, the breeze dying down, and the height of the waves decreasing; the raft floated more easily, and it no longer became necessary for them to cling tightly to the supports to prevent being flung overboard. But there came out of the void no promise of rescue; the sea remained desolate and untraversed, and finally a mist hung over the water, narrowing the horizon. During the day they saw smoke but always far to the east, and quickly disappearing. Once West felt assured his eyes caught the glimmer of a white sail to the southward, but it was too far away for him to be sure. At best, it was but a momentary vision, fading almost instantly against the grey curtain of sky. He had scarcely attempted to point it out to Natalie when it completely vanished.

Their effort to talk to each other ceased gradually; there was so little they could say in the presence of the growing peril surrounding them. They had become the helpless sport of the waves, unable to act, think or plan, surrounded by hor-

ror, and aimlessly drifting toward the gloom of another night. Wearied beyond all power of resistance, the girl sank lower and lower until she finally lay outstretched in utter abandonment. West thrust his coat beneath her head, securely binding her to the raft by the rope's end, and sat beside her dejectedly, staring forth into the surrounding smother. She did not speak, and finally her eyes closed. Undoubtedly she slept, but he made every effort to remain awake and on watch, rubbing his heavy eyes, and struggling madly to overcome the drowsiness which assailed him. How long he won, he will never know; the sun was in the west, a red ball of fire showing dimly through the cloud, and all about the same dancing expanse of sea, drear and dead. The raft rose and fell, rose and fell, so monotonously as to lull his consciousness imperceptibly; his head drooped forward, and with fingers still automatically gripped for support, he fell sound asleep also.

The raft drifted aimlessly on, the waves lapping its sides, and tossing it about as though in wanton play. The currents and the wind held it in their relentless grip, and bore it steadily forward, surging along the grey surface of the sea. The girl lay quiet, her face upturned, unconscious

now of her dread surroundings; and the man swayed above her, his head bent upon his breast, both sleeping the sleep of sheer exhaustion. Out of the dim mist shrouding the eastern sky the vague outline of a distant steamer revealed itself for a moment, the smoke from its stacks adding to the gathering gloom. It was but a vision fading swiftly away into silence. No throb of the engines awoke the unconscious sleepers; no eye on the speeding deck saw the low-lying raft, or its occupants. The vessel vanished as suddenly as it had appeared, leaving nothing but a trackless waste of sea. The two slept on.

It was the startled cry of Natalie that roused West, and brought his drooping head upright. She was sitting up, still held safely by the coil of rope, and pointing excitedly behind him.

"Oh, see there! Look where I point—isn't that land?"

The raft rocked as he swung his body hastily about, and gazed intently in the direction indicated. Land! of course it was land; land already so close at hand, his eyes could trace its conformation—the narrow strip of sand beach, the sharp bluff beyond, the fringe of trees crowning the summit. He rubbed his eyes, scarcely able to credit his sight, half believing it a mirage.

Yet the view remained unchanged; it was land, a bit of the west shore, a short promontory running out into the lake toward which the raft, impelled by some hidden current, was steadily drifting. His arm clasped the girl in sudden ecstasy.

"Yes, it's land, thank God!" he exclaimed thoughtfully. "We are floating ashore, Natalie—saved in spite of ourselves. Why, we could not have been so far out in the lake after all. That must be why all those vessels passed to the east of us. I ought to have thought of that before; those villians would never have deserted the yacht in mid-lake, and taken to the boat. They must have known they could make shore easily."

Her glance searched the face of the bluff, which with each moment was becoming more distinctly visible.

"You don't suppose they landed here, do you?"

"Not very likely; even if they did they are not here now. They would have made it before daylight this morning. All the time we have been drifting out there, they had to get away in. There is no danger that Hogan is anywhere along this shore now."

"You think he and—and those others have all gone?"

"Yes; why should they hang around here? The last idea in their heads would be the possibility of our ever drifting in alive. Hogan has gone back to Chicago to make a report to Hobart, and the rest have scattered like a covey of partridges. Not one of them has a thought but that we went down in the *Seminole.* Now they'll pull off their graft, and pull it quick."

"And what will you do?"

"Get safely ashore first. It will be dark in less than an hour; but we are too far out yet to venture swimming. We shall have to hang tight to the raft a while yet, and drift; the current is carrying us all right. Do you see any sign of life over there—houses, or smoke?"

"No; I have been looking; the whole shore-line appears utterly deserted. Have you any idea where we can be?"

"Not the slightest; only this is certainly the west shore; there is no such abandoned spot anywhere between Chicago and Milwaukee, and we must be much farther north. They had plenty of time to put the yacht quite a ways up shore before they sank her."

"Hogan must have known where he was."

"Unquestionably; it was all planned out; he knew exactly where he intended to land, and how

long it would take them to reach there after they left the yacht."

"Perhaps," she suggested hesitatingly, "the gang had some rendezvous up here in these north-woods, a place where they could hide."

West shook his head negatively.

"No, I don't think that; they may know the country, and how best to get away quickly. But those fellows are city thieves—Hobart and Hogan anyway—and would feel far safer back in their haunts in Chicago. There is no place like a big city to hide in, and besides, even if they have got the money already,—which I doubt—there has been no chance to divide it, and 'Red' would never let Hobart get away without paying him his share. They are not loitering around here, Natalie, waiting for ghosts to appear; they are back in town hours ago."

"But what can we do?"

"Get ashore first, of course, and discover the quickest way to return to the city. None of this shore is deserted, and we'll find houses back behind that fringe of woods. I figure we have a big advantage. We know their real game now, and they are so sure we are both dead, they'll operate in the open—walk right into a trap. By this time

McAdams must have discovered some clue as to the whereabouts of Hobart. With him under arrest, and our story told, some of these fellows will confess, and it will all be over with."

"But suppose they have already succeeded in their purpose?"

"That can hardly be possible, Natalie. There hasn't been time yet. Certain legal forms must be complied with. You could only draw a limited amount."

"Until I reached a certain age; after which there was no restriction. I attained that age yesterday."

"And they are aware of it, no doubt. Yet there must be some legal authorization necessary which may cause delay. The sooner we reach Chicago, the better. It is twilight already—the sun has gone down behind the bluff, but it will require an hour yet for this raft to drift into shallow water. You swim, you told me?"

"Yes, very well indeed."

"Shall we risk it then together? It is not far to the end of the point yonder."

She looked where he pointed and smiled, glancing back into his questioning eyes.

"Why, that involves no danger at all. I will

do anything to get off this raft. But if we are going to have light we must start at once."

The two slipped silently over the edge of the dipping raft, and struck out for the nearest point of land, West loitering slightly behind, afraid lest she might be hampered, and perhaps dragged down by her water-soaked clothes. A few strokes reassured him as to this, as she struck out vigorously, her every motion exhibiting trained skill. She glanced back at him, and smiled at his precaution; then faced resolutely toward the distant shore, swimming easily. He followed closely, timing his strokes to her own, confident, yet watchful still, while behind them, now but a dim speck in the grey sea, wallowed the deserted raft.

The distance was greater than it had seemed, the twilight deceiving their eyes, while their clothing had a tendency to retard progress. Weakened by lack of food, and buffetted by cross currents, both were decidedly exhausted by the time their lowering feet finally touched bottom. Natalie staggered, faint and dizzy from the exertion, but West grasped her in his arms before she could fall, and carried her across the sand beach to the foot of the cliff. She laughed as he laid her gently down in the soft sand, putting up her arms

to him like a child, and drawing his face down until their lips met.

"Oh," she exclaimed breathlessly, "That was glorious, but I hardly had enough strength left to make it. It—it was an awfully long way."

"There are currents off shore," he explained. "That was what made the swimming so difficult. You are all right now."

"Yes; at least I think so," she sat up. "Why, it is almost dark already. I cannot see the old raft at all. I—I wish it would come ashore; it gave you to me, Matt."

"And you are not sorry, even now, safe here on shore?"

"Sorry! Why I am the happiest girl in all the world this minute. I can hardly think about that money at all, or those scoundrels trying to rob me. I am here with you, and you love me—what more can I ask? Is that silly, dear?"

He laughed, and kissed her, neither giving a thought to their dripping garments, or a regret for the hardships they had passed through. They were there alone, safe, together—all else for the moment mattered not.

"Yes, I love you, Natalie, dear," he answered. "So it is not silly at all. But we must seek shelter

and food. Are you strong enough now to climb the bluff? See, there is a ravine leading up yonder, where the footing is easier."

She nodded her readiness to try, too happy for words, and hand in hand they toiled their way upward through the gloom.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE HOUSE IN THE BLUFFS

THE cleft in the bluff was both narrow and steep, but it gave them passage. At the upper end Natalie's reserve strength suddenly deserted her, and she sank down on the grass, labouring for breath, feeling unable to advance a step farther. The days and nights of excitement, coupled with lack of food and sleep, had left her physically weakened; now suddenly, even her will and courage both gave away.

"No, it is nothing," she explained in a whisper. "I am just completely tired out, I guess. You go on, Matt, and find some place of shelter. Leave me to lie here; I'll not move, and you can find me easily. All I want now is to rest a few moments. Afraid! no I'll not be afraid. Why, what is there to fear? this is a civilized country, isn't it? I'll just sit where I am now until you come back—only—only don't go very far away."

She held out her hand, and endeavoured to smile.

"Desert me! Of course you are not, dear. I am bidding you go. I shall not mind being left here alone. I am so tired."

They were at the summit of the bluff, looking out over the lake, now a mere darker blot. They could hear the dash of waves below them along the edge of sand. But in the opposite direction rose a somewhat higher ridge on which trees grew, completely excluding the view beyond. Between the branches the distant sky still retained a purple tinge from the sinking sun, leaving the impression that it was much lighter up there. West felt the importance of gaining a view inland before the closing down of night obscured everything, and therefore reluctantly left her alone there while he made his way to the top of the ridge. Once there he could look across the promontory of land, down into a little cove on the opposite side. It was well sheltered, and already wrapped in gloomy shadows, yet his eyes detected the outline of a boat of some size drawn up on the sandy beach. Beyond the dim certainty of what it was he could perceive nothing with which to identify the craft, and deeming it some fishing boat, gave its presence there no further heed.

Glancing back to assure himself that Natalie was still safe where he had left her, he picked his

way swiftly forward through the thick fringe of forest trees, until he came to the western edge of the wood, and could view the country beyond in the last spectral glow of the dying day. It was a wild, broken country thus revealed to his gaze, a land of ridges and ravines, rugged and picturesque, but exhibiting no evidence of roads, or inhabitants. Its very roughness of outline, and its sterile soil, explained the barrenness and desolation —a no-man's land, impossible of cultivation, it remained neglected and unused. At first he was sure of this, his heart sinking at the deserted landscape. They must plunge blindly forward in the dark over that rough, trackless country, seeking some possible shelter beyond. Weakened and exhausted as they both were the task seemed almost an impossible one. Then his eyes caught a thin spiral of smoke rising from out a narrow valley almost directly beneath where he stood, the depths of which were totally concealed from sight. As he stared at this, uncertain of its reality, a single spark of light winked out at him through the darkness. There was certainly a habitation of some kind hidden away down there—a fisherman's hut likely—but it would at least afford temporary shelter for the night; and there must be a road or path of some kind leading from it to

the nearest village. If he could only leave Natalie there in safe hands, in the security of a home, however humble, food would give him strength to push on alone. The one thought in his mind now was to telegraph McAdams, so as to circumvent the plans of those rascals in Chicago. This must be done, and it must be done at the earliest moment possible. Perhaps the fisherman might possess a horse, or would carry the necessary message into town himself. West turned and hastened back through the woods, clambering down the slope of the ridge in darkness to the spot where he had left the girl. For the moment he could not distinguish her presence in the gloom, and, fearing he might have gone astray, called her name aloud.

"Yes," she answered. "I am here; to your right. I am standing up. Have you discovered anything?"

"There is a house of some kind over yonder in a hollow just beyond the ridge—more than likely a fisherman's hut, as there is a boat of some kind beached in the cove the other side of this promotory. We will have to stumble along through the dark. Do you think you can make it?"

"Of course, I can," and she placed her hand confidingly in his. "I am all right now; really I

am; I guess all I needed was to get my breath. Do we go up here—the way you came back?"

"I presume so; I know no other passage, and found no path."

"But," she urged. "If there is a boat on the beach, isn't it likely there would be a trail from there to this fisherman's hut?"

"Why, of course; it was stupid of me not to think of this before. The sooner we start, the quicker we shall arrive. I want most of all to telegraph McAdams."

"Who?"

"McAdams, the detective I told you about in Chicago, an old army buddy of mine. He'll have Hobart located by this time, no doubt, and will put the screws on him when he learns what has happened to us."

"I see," she agreed softly, "and if he does know the whole story we need not be so crazy to get back. He will attend to everything."

"Yes; we can wait up here until morning at least; you need a night's rest, and no wonder."

He grasped her arm, helping her to clamber up the steep bank, suddenly becoming aware that the sleeve felt dry.

"Why, Natalie, your clothes seem to have all

dried off already; mine are soaked through," he exclaimed in surprise. "What necromancy is this?"

She laughed, a faint tinge of mockery in the sound.

"No mystery whatever; only a difference in texture, I imagine. This light stuff dries quickly, exposed to the air. Did you think you had hold of the wrong girl?"

The tone of her voice stung slightly, causing him to make a sober answer.

"That would, of course, be improbable, but I have been so completely deceived, even by daylight, that I dare not affirm that it would prove impossible. Your counterfeit is certainly a wizard."

"She must be. But as she is miles away from here, you might let the suspicion rest. Is this where we go down?"

She led the way, the action awakening no question in his mind. If he thought at all about her thus assuming the initiative, the suspicion was dismissed with the idea that probably her eyes were more keen to discover the best path. In this she was certainly successful, and he contented himself by following her closely. The night was already dark, the way irregular and confusing. She was

but a dim shadow, advancing confidently, and now and then in their descent, he reached out and touched her to make sure of her presence. This action seemed to irritate for she turned once, and objected shortly.

"Oh, don't do that, please; it startles me. My nerves are all on edge."

"Of course they are, dear," he confessed apologetically. "I should have known better. It was so dark I almost thought you had slipped away. The boat I told you about must be close at hand."

"The boat; oh, yes, but it can be of no use to us now. Feel here with your feet; I am sure this must be a path that I am in, and it can lead nowhere except to that house you saw."

"Can you follow it?"

"I think so; it seems to go straight up through the ravine; see, you can trace the bluff against the sky, and there is the opening just ahead of us. You may take my arm again now," she added graciously, "and then there will be no danger of either getting lost."

He gladly did as she suggested, yet, strangely enough, continued to feel dissatisfied. Vaguely he felt that in some almost imperceptible manner she had changed her mood. He could not base

his thoughts on a single word, or action, yet he felt the difference—this was not the Natalie of the raft. She was too irritable; too sharp of speech. But then, no doubt, she was tired, worn out, her nerves broken; indeed he found it hard to control himself, and he must not blame her for exhibiting weakness under the strain. So he drove the thought from him, clinging close to her arm, and vaguely wondering how she was able to trace the path so easily. They seemed to progress through an impenetrable wall of blackness, and yet the way had been cleared of obstacles, and was reasonably smooth. The slope upward was quite gradual, and the summit led directly into the mouth of a small valley. By this time even West could recognize that they were proceeding along a well used path, and he was not surprised when she announced the presence of the house before them, pointing out the dim shadow through the gloom. Otherwise his eyes might have failed to distinguish the outlines, but under her guidance he could make out enough of its general form to assure him that they were approaching no mere fisherman's shack.

"That is no hut," he exclaimed in surprise. "It looks more like a mansion."

"And why not?" pleasantly enough. "I have always heard these bluffs were filled with summer homes. Unfortunately this one appears to be deserted. But we must go on, and try to discover some inhabitant."

There was no light to guide them, yet the path was easily followed, through what apparently was an orchard, then through the gate of a rustic fence to a broad carriage drive, circling past the front door. All was silence, desolation; no window exhibited a gleam of radiance, nor did a sound greet them from any direction. They paused an instant before the front door, uncertain how to proceed.

"But there must be some one about here," West insisted. "For this was the house I saw from the ridge, and there was a light burning then in one of the windows, and there was a wisp of smoke rising from a chimney. Perhaps the shutters are all closed, or, early as it is, the people may have retired."

She stepped boldly forward, and placed her hand on the knob of the door.

"Why," she whispered, excitedly. "It is unlocked; see, I can open it. Perhaps something is wrong here. What shall we do?"

"Knock first; then if there is no response, we can feel our way about inside. My matches are all wet."

She rapped sharply on the wood; waited for some reply, and then called out. Not a sound reached them from within. The situation was strange, nerve-racking, and she shrank back as though frightened before the black silence confronting her. West, his teeth clinched, stepped in through the open door, determined to learn the secret of that mysterious interior. With hands outstretched he felt his way forward, by sense of touch alone assuring himself that he traversed a hall, carpeted, his extended arms barely reaching from wall to wall. He encountered no furniture, and must have advanced some two yards, before his groping disclosed the presence of a closed door on the left. He had located the knob, when the outer door suddenly closed, as though blown shut by a draught of wind, and, at the same instant, his eyes were blinded by a dazzling outburst of light.

This came with such startling, unexpected brilliancy that West staggered back as though struck. For the instant he was positively blind; then he dimly perceived a man standing before him—a man who, little by little, became more clearly defined, recognizable, suddenly exhibiting the fea-

tures of Jim Hobart, sarcastically grinning into his face.

"You are evidently a cat of nine lives, West," he said sneeringly. "But this ought to be the last of them."

CHAPTER XXX

HOBART FORGETS AND TALKS

FOR a moment West lost all control over himself. He was too completely dazed for either words or action; could only stare into that mocking countenance confronting him, endeavouring to sense what had really occurred. He was undoubtedly trapped again, but how had the trick been accomplished? What devilish freak of ill luck had thus thrown them once more into the merciless hands of this ruffian? How could it have happened so perfectly? The boat on the sand in the cove yonder; perhaps that was the key to the situation. Those fellows who had left the *Seminole* to sink behind them, knew where they were when they deserted the yacht; they landed at the nearest point along shore, where they had a rendezvous already arranged for. Then what? The helpless raft had naturally drifted in the same direction, blown by the steady east wind, until gripped by the land current, and thus finally

driven into this opening on the coast. His mind had grasped this view, this explanation, before he even ventured to turn his head, and glance at the girl. She stood leaning back against the closed door as though on guard, her uncovered hair ruffled, a scornful, defiant look in her eyes, the smile on her lips revealing the gleam of white teeth. In spite of a wonderful resemblance, a mysterious counterfeit in both features and expression, West knew now this was not Natalie Coolidge. Her dress, the way in which her hair was done, the sneering curl of her red mouth, were alike instantly convincing. He had permitted himself to be tricked again by the jade; the smart of the wound angered him beyond control.

"You are not Miss Coolidge," he insisted hotly. "Then who are you?"

She laughed, evidently enjoying the scene, confident of her own cleverness.

"Oh, so even Captain West has at last penetrated the disguise. No, I am not the lady you mention, if you must know."

"Then who are you?"

She glanced toward Hobart, as though questioning, and the man answered the look gruffly.

"Tell him if you want to, Del," he said, with an oath. "It will never do the guy any good. He's

played his last hand in this game; he'll never get away from me again. Spit it out."

"All right," with a mocking curtsey. "I've got an idea I'd like to tell him; it is too good a joke to keep, and this fellow has certainly been an easy mark. You never did catch on to me until I got into the wrong clothes, did you, old dear? Lord, but I could have had you making love to me, if I'd only have said the word—out there on the hills in the dark, hey! I sure wanted to laugh; but that tender tone of yours told me what you were up to; what sent you trailing us around the country—you was plumb nutty after this Natalie Coolidge. That's the straight goods, isn't it, Mister Captain West?"

"I care very much for Miss Coolidge, if that is what you mean."

"Sure you do; and you've put up a game fight for her too, my boy. I'd like it in you if I wasn't on the other side. But you see we can't be easy on you just because of that. Sentiment and romance is one thing, while business is another. You and I don't belong in the same worlds—see? You can't rightly blame me because I was born different, can you?"

"Perhaps not; what would you make me believe?"

"I thought I'd put it that way so you'd understand, that's all. There's a difference in people, ain't there. I'm just as good looking as this Natalie Coolidge, ain't I? Sure I am; you can't even tell us apart when we are dressed up alike. I could come in here, and have you make love to me inside of twenty minutes. But we ain't a bit alike for all that. She's a lady, and I'm a crook —that's the difference. She's been brought up with all the money she wants, while I've had to hustle for every penny since I was a kid. Now life don't ever look the same to any two people like that."

"No," West admitted, beginning to realize her defence. "It is hardly probable it would."

"That's why I'm in this case," she went on, apparently unheeding his interruption. "I was brought up a thief, and I don't know anything else. I never did care much, but in this Coolidge matter, I've got just as much right to all that kale as she has—so naturally I'm going after it."

"As much right, you say? Why, who are you?"

She stood up straight, and looked at him, her eyes burning.

"Me!" scornfully, "Why I am Delia Hobart—'Diamond Del,' they call me."

"Yes, but that is not what you mean; that gives you no such right as you claim. You are Hobart's daughter then?"

"I didn't say so, Mister Captain West. I told you my moniker, that's all. Jim here brought me up, but he ain't no father to me, and his wife ain't my mother. It took me a while to find that out, but I got the thing straight at last. I saw then just what those two were driving at; first I didn't take no particular interest in the scheme; then I got to thinking until finally I hated that soft, downy thing; damn her, she'd robbed me, and I had a right to my share even if I had to steal it."

"What soft, downy thing?"

"Natalie Coolidge! Bah, I went out to see her once. Jim took me and we hid in the garden; and when I came back I was raving mad. Lord, why should that little idiot have everything while half the time I was hungry?"

"You mean you envied her?"

"Envied, hell! Didn't I have a right? Wasn't she my twin sister? Didn't she have it all, and I nothing?"

He gasped for breath at this sudden revelation. Then he laughed, convinced it could not be possible.

"Who told you that?"

"Why, don't you believe it? Has she never said a word about it to you?"

"Certainly not. I am sure she possesses no knowledge of ever having had a sister. Moreover, I do not believe it is true. If you had proof of such relationship, why didn't you go to her, and openly claim your share?"

"Go to her! me? Do you hear that Jim? Isn't he the cute little fixer? Why, of course, she knew it; there was nothing doing on the divide. It's all straight enough, only we couldn't quite prove it by law; anyhow that is what they told me—so we got at it from another direction."

She seemed so convinced, so earnest in her statement that West in perplexity turned to glance at Hobart.

"Do you make this claim also?" he asked.

"What claim?"

"That this girl is a twin sister to Natalie Coolidge? Why, it is preposterous."

"Is it? Damned if I think so. Now look here, West; I don't know just what the Coolidge girl has been told; maybe she never even heard she had a twin sister. If they ever told her that she had, then they must have told her also that the sister died in infancy. Anyhow, that's how it stands on

the records. There were just two people who knew different—do you get me? One of them is dead, but one of them is still alive."

"Which one is dead?"

"Percival Coolidge; he knew too much and got gay; he planned to cop the whole boodle. The fact is he started the whole scheme, soon as he learned who Del was, and planned it all out. He was up against it hard just then for money; he'd lost all his own, and couldn't get hold of Natalie's because the old family lawyer watched things so close."

"But if this girl was really entitled to a part of it, why not claim it by law?"

"We talked about that, but the chance didn't look good. Everything showed the second child died; hospital records, doctor's certificate; there wasn't a link in the chain we could break. Percival wouldn't go on the stand, and there wasn't much he could swear to if he did."

"But who was the other witness—the living one?"

"The nurse; she made the exchange of the dead baby for the living one. It was easily done as the child was really sick."

"But for what object—revenge?"

"She was poor, and yielded to temptation.

Percival Coolidge paid her to make the exchange. I have never been able to learn what his original purpose was, but she thinks he believed the stolen child was a boy, and that later, through him, the Coolidge money might be controlled. However the woman lost her nerve, and disappeared with the infant. She brought it up as her own in the west, where she married again. I am her second husband, and that is how I learned the truth."

"The woman on the yacht?"

"Yes, you saw her. The child was brought up in our life; I figured on this coup for years, and finally when all was ready, we came back east again. I had a plan, but I wasn't quite sure it would work until I could see the two girls together. After that it was like taking candy from a kid. Hell, you are the only one who has even piped off the game."

West looked closely at the man, who was thus coolly boasting of his exploits, and then at the silent girl, whose eyes sullenly gave back their challenge. What did it all mean? Why were they calmly telling him these things? Was it merely the egotism of crime, pride of achievement? or did Hobart hope in some way to thus win his assistance, or at least his silence?"

"Why do you tell all this to me, Hobart?" he

asked shortly. "You do not expect me to play with you in the game, do you?"

"You!" the fellow laughed coarsely. "We don't care what you do, you young fool. Del started this talking, and I let her go on. Then, when she stopped, I thought you might as well learn the rest of it. The fact is, West, we're fixed now so whatever you know won't hurt us any. We have as good as got the swag; and, to make it absolutely safe, we've got both you and the girl. I'll say this for you, old man, you've sure put up a game fight. I don't know how the hell you ever got out of that yacht alive, or ever happened to drift in here. It was nothing but bull luck that gave us a glimpse of you tossing round on that raft—but after that it was dead easy. Del here is some actorine."

"Yes," she broke in, "but I came near falling down this time. I forgot they had been in the water, and my dress was dry as a bone—say, I thought he'd tripped me sure."

"You say you've got the swag?"

"All but in our hands; nobody can get it away from us. The court order was issued today; the entire estate placed, in accordance with the terms of the will, in the possession of Natalie Coolidge. Once the proper receipt is signed, all monies can

be checked out by her. That about settles it, doesn't it? Tomorrow Del and I will go down to the city, and turn the trick, and after that there is nothing left but the get-away."

It was a cold blooded proposition, but neither face exhibited any regret; both were intoxicated by success; untroubled by any scruples of conscience. West felt the utter uselessness of an attempt to appeal to either.

"Where is Natalie Coolidge?" he asked, his own determination hardening. "What do you propose doing with her?"

Hobart's teeth exhibited themselves in a sardonic grin.

"That is our business, but you can bet she'll not interfere."

"And a similar answer, I presume, will apply also to my case?"

"It will. Don't make the mistake, West, of believing we are damn fools. I don't know just why I've blowed all this to you, but it ain't going to help you any, you can be sure of that. In fact your knowing how the thing was worked is liable to make things a blame sight harder in your case. We won't do no more talking; so go on in through that door."

The fellow's demeanour had entirely changed;

he was no longer pretending to geniality, and his words were almost brutal. Apparently, all at once, it had dawned sharply upon him that they had made a mistake—had boasted far too freely. Any slip now, after what had been said, would wreck the ship. West faced him watchfully, fully aware of the desperate situation, instinctively feeling that this might be his last chance.

"In there, you say?" indicating the closed door.

"Yes; move!"

He did; with one swift leap forward, the whole impetus of his body behind the blow, West drove his fist straight into the face confronting him. The fellow reeled, clutched feebly at the smooth wall for support, dropped helplessly forward, and fell headlong, with face hidden in outstretched arms. The assailant sprang back, and turned, in a mad determination to crash his way out through the locked door behind, but as suddenly stopped startled by the vision of a levelled revolver pointed at his head.

"Not a move," the girl said icily. "Take one step, and I'll kill you."

Hobart lifted his head groggily, and pushed himself half-way up on his knees.

"Don't shoot unless he makes you, Del," he ordered grimly. "We don't want that kind of

row here." He dragged himself painfully to the side door, and pressed it open.

"Hey you!" he cried. "Come on out here. Now then, rough-house this guy!"

CHAPTER XXXI

MCADAMS BLOWS IN

IT was a real fight; they all knew that when it was finished. But it was three to one, with Hobart blocking the only open door, and egging them on, and the excited girl, backed into a corner out of the way, the revolver still gripped in her hand, ready for any emergency. The narrowness of the hall alone afforded West a chance, as the walls protected him, and compelled direct attack from in front. Yet this advantage only served to delay the ending. He recognized two of the fellows—"Red" Hogan and Mark—while the third man was a wiry little bar-room scrapper, who smashed fiercely in through his guard, and finally got a grip on his throat which could not be wrenched loose. The others pounded him unmercifully, driving his head back against the wall. Hogan smashed him twice, crashing through his weak attempt at defence, and with the second vicious drive, West went down for the count, lying

motionless on the floor, scarcely conscious that he was still living.

Yet in a dazed, helpless way, he was aware of what was occurring about him; he could hear voices, feel the thud of a brutal kick. Some one dragged him out from the mess, and turned his face up to the light; but he lay there barely breathing; his eyes tightly closed.

"It's a knock-out all right," Hogan declared. "That guy is good for an hour in dream-land. What's the dope?"

"We got to keep him here, that's all; and there's goin' to be no get-away this time."

"How'd he do it before, Jim? did he tell you?"

"Not a damned word; I was fool enough to do all the talking. But this fellow is too slick to take any more chances with."

"Do you want him croaked?"

"No, I don't—not now. What the hell's the use? It would only make things harder. We're ready to make our get-away, ain't we? After tomorrow all hell can't get onto our trail. This guy's life wouldn't help us none, so far as I can see."

"Getting squeamish, ain't you?"

"No, I'm not. I've got as much reason to hate the fellow as you have, 'Red.' He certainly

swiped me one. Before we had the swag copped, I was willing enough to put him out of the running. That was business. You sure did a fine job then, damn you; now I don't think it is your time to howl. Listen here, will you? From all I learn, this bird amounts to something; he ain't just a dago to be bumped off, and nobody care what's become of him. This guy has got friends. It won't help us any to be hunted after for murder on top of this other job. If we cop the kale, that's all we're after. Is that right, Del?"

The girl seemed to come forward, and face them defiantly.

"Sure it's right. I never was for the strong arm stuff, Hogan. This is my graft, anyhow, and not one of you stiffs gets a penny of it unless I split with you. This fellow isn't going to be slugged—that's flat. It is only because he's fell in love with the Coolidge girl that he is here, and once we've skipped out, I don't wish the guy any bad luck."

"You ought to have caught him yourself, Del," some one said. "The bird never would have known the difference."

She laughed, quickly restored to good humour.

"You're about right there, Dave," she answered.

"That was another mistake; the only chance I ever had of marrying in high social circles. But hell, I'll be a lady tomorrow, so let's let the poor devil go. Wrap him up, and lay him away out in the garage. The walls are two foot solid stone; he'll stay buried there all right."

Hogan growled in derision, yet it was evident that she and Hobart would have their way. Some one brought a rope, which was deftly wound about him, West continuing to feign unconsciousness. He secretly hoped this condition might result in some carelessness on their part, in either speech or action. Anyway it would undoubtedly save him from further brutal treatment. He had no reason to suspect that his ruse was questioned. The fellows spoke freely while making him secure, but he gained very little information from their conversation—not a hint as to where Natalie was confined, or how long it was proposed to hold them prisoners. Then "Red" and Dave lugged his limp body through several rooms, out upon a back porch, finally dragging him down the steps and along a cement drive way, letting him lie there a moment in the dark, while one of them unlocked a door. The next instant he was carelessly thrown inside, and the door forced back

into place. He could hear Hogan swear outside, and then the sound of both men's feet on the drive as they departed.

With a struggle West managed to sit up, but could scarcely attempt more, as his arms were bound closely to his sides. The darkness about him was intense, and, with the disappearance of the two men up the steps, all outside sounds had ceased. He knew he had been flung into the garage and was resting there on the hard cement floor. He could neither feel nor see any machine, nor was there probably the slightest prospect of his getting out unaided. Those fellows would never have left him there without guard, had they dreamed any escape was possible. The girl had affirmed the building was constructed of stone, two feet thick. He stared around at the impenetrable black wall completely defeated. Undoubtedly they had him this time. He was weak from hunger, tired nearly to death; bruised and battered until it seemed as though every muscle in his body throbbed with pain. Yet his mind was not on these things, only incidentally; his thought, his anxiety centred altogether on Natalie Coolidge. What had become of her; where was she now? He had no reason to believe her in any great personal danger. If this gang, satisfied of success,

were disposed to spare his life, it was hardly probable they would demand her's. Now both the desire for murder, and the necessity, had passed. The fellows felt supremely confident the spoils were already theirs, and that all that was needed now to assure complete success was sufficient time in which to drop safely out of sight. Murder would hinder, rather than help this escape.

But what a blind fool he had been; how strangely he had permitted this girl to lead him so easily astray. Why really, to his mind now, she possessed no real resemblance to Natalie; not enough, at least, to deceive the keen eyes of love. She had the features, the eyes, the hair, the voice, a certain trick of speech, which, no doubt, she had cultivated—but there were a thousand things in which she differed. Her laugh was not the same, nor the expression of her lips; she was like a counterfeit beside a good coin. It was easy to conceive how others might be deceived by her tricks of resemblance—servants, ordinary friends, even the old lawyer in charge of the estate—but it was inexcusable for him to have thus become a plaything. Yet he had, and now the mistake was too late to mend. He had left Natalie alone on the cliff, and then blindly permitted this chit to lead him straight into Hobart's set trap. An-

gered beyond control at the memory, West swore, straining fiercely in the vain endeavour to release his arms. Then, realizing his utter helplessness, he sank back on the floor, and lay still.

What was that? He listened, for an instant doubtful if he had really heard anything. Then he actually heard a sound. He doubted no longer, yet made no effort to move, even holding his breath in suspense. There was movement of some kind back there—a cautious movement; seemingly the slow advance of something across the floor, a dog perhaps. West's heart throbbed with apprehension; suppose it was a dog, he had no means of protection from the brute. Cold sweat tingled on his flesh; there was nothing he could do, no place where he could go. The thing was moving nearer; yet surely it could not be a dog; no dog would ever creep like that. He could bear the strain no longer; it was beyond endurance.

"What's moving back there?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

There was a moment of utter silence; then, a man's voice said in low, cautious tone.

"The fellow ain't dead, Mac; anyhow he seems able to talk yet."

"All right, we'll find out what he's got to say—go on along."

West sat up, his heart bounding with sudden remembrance.

"My God! McAdams is that you?"

"You have the name—who's speaking?"

"Matt West. Good God, but this is like a miracle. I'd played my last card. Come here, one of you, and cut these strings. I cannot even move, or stand up. Is it really you, Mac? Yes, yes, I am all right; they bruised me up a bit, of course, but that is nothing. Now I have a chance to pay them out. But who are with you? and how did you come to be here?"

McAdams ran his knife blade through the lashings, feeling for them in the dark. Neither could see the other, but West realized that another man had crept up on the opposite side of him, and crouched there silently in the blackness.

"Need any help, Mac?" the latter questioned in a whisper.

"No, I've got him cut loose. This is the lad I told you about, Carlyn. You go on back, and, as soon as West gets limbered up a bit, and I hear his story, we join you out there. Then we'll know how the ground lies."

The fellow crept away unseen, and McAdams gripped West's hand.

"Say, but this is mighty good luck, old boy," he blurted out. "I was afraid you'd gone down in that yacht last night."

"You were! How did you know about it?"

"Stumbled on to the story, the way most detectives solve their mysteries. That is, I stumbled on some of it, and the rest I dug out for myself. It won't take long to explain and perhaps you better understand. They told me at the office when I got back about the *Seminole* being tied up at the Municipal Pier, and that you had gone down there. Well, I made it as quick as I could, but the yacht was three hundred yards out in the lake by the time I arrived. There wasn't a damn thing to take after it in, and, besides, just then, I didn't really know any good police reason for chasing her. First thing I did was to try and find you, so we could get our heads together. But you wasn't there, and so I naturally jumped to the conclusion you must have got aboard someway. Say I combed that pier, believe me, West, and finally I ran across a kid who put me wise. He saw you go across the deck, and into the cabin with two other guys. They came out again, but you didn't. I pumped him until I got a pretty good descrip-

tion of both those fellows, and I decided one of them must be 'Red' Hogan, about the toughest gun-man in Chicago."

"It was Hogan."

"I made sure of that afterwards. Then I got busy. If you was in the hands of that guy, and his gang, the chances was dead against you. But there wasn't a darn thing I could do, except to hunt up Hobart, wire every town along the north shore to keep an eye out for the yacht, and pick up a thread or two around town. I got a bit at that to wise me up. We found Hobart hid away in a cheap hotel out on Broadway, and put a trailer on him. The girl had disappeared; she'd been to a bank, and then to the Coolidge lawyer and signed some papers; after that we lost all trace of her for awhile. Your man Sexton, out at 'Fairlawn,' reported that she hadn't returned there. Then I got desperate and decided I'd blow the whole thing to the Coolidge lawyer, and get him to take a hand. I was afraid they were already for the get-a-way—see? I couldn't round 'em up alone; besides I'm a Chicago police officer, and have to keep more or less on my own beat."

"And you told the lawyer?"

"Everything I knew, and some I guessed at. I thought the old guy would throw a fit, but he

didn't. He came through game after the first shock. But say, that dame had sold him out all right. He never had an inkling anything was wrong; no more did the banks. We went over, and talked to the president of one of them—a smooth guy with white mutton chops—and the girl had signed up the preliminary papers already, and tomorrow the whole boodle was going to drop softly into her lap. Say, I felt better when I learned they hadn't copped the swag yet. But just the same I needed help."

"And you got it?"

"Sure; those two duffers coughed up money in a stream. Called in a detective agency, and gave me three operatives to work under me. Got the chief on the wire, and made him give me a free hand. Then I had a cinch."

CHAPTER XXXII

A BRIDGE OF LOVE

HE paused, listening, but all remained quiet without, and he resumed his story.

"There is not much else to it, West. A little after one o'clock the shadow phoned in from the Union depot that Hobart had just purchased two tickets for Patacne. We hustled over, but were too late to catch that train, but learned the girl had accompanied him on the trip. We caught another rattler two hours later, and got off at Patacne, which is about three miles west of here. It is not much of a job to gather up gossip in a small burg, and, inside of ten minutes, I had extracted all I needed from the station agent. It seems this outfit was the summer sensation out here. We hoofed it for reasons of our own, and came around by way of the lake shore, aiming to keep out of sight until after dark. That is how we discovered that *Seminole* boat hauled up on the beach, but with no yacht in sight. One of the fellows with me said Hogan did a boat-sinking job

before and got away with it, and that is how I figured that maybe you was at the bottom of Lake Michigan—see? Well, we crept up here through the woods, but nothing happened. Didn't look as if the place had a soul within a hundred miles of it—no smoke, no light; not a damn sound. We laid out and waited, not sure what we were up against. Finally we jimmied open the back door of this garage, just to find out whether those guys had a car out here, or not. They had, but we no more than located it when those two fellows came dragging you out of the back door of the house, and flung you in here like a bag of old linen. We lay still, and let them go back, but we hadn't any notion whether you was dead or alive —or whether it was really you; so we crawled up to find out. That's the story. Now what do you think we better do?"

West moved his arms in an effort to restore circulation.

"How many with you?"

"Four altogether—hard boiled, too—five with you. Is there any fight left in you, old man?"

"I'll say there is; I'd certainly like to get in one clip at 'Red' before the fracas is over."

"That sounds vicious. Now who is inside?"

"I saw five, and there may be others. If the

crew of the *Seminole* are here also, that would make quite a bunch."

"I don't think they are, Captain. The station agent said several men bought tickets to Chicago early this afternoon. It is the real gang we've got cornered. Do you know just who they are?"

"Those I saw were Hobart, 'Red' Hogan, the girl, a big fellow they called Mark who was on the yacht—"

"Mark Sennett; he's Hogan's side-kick, and tough as they make 'em."

"And a wiry little black-haired devil by the name of Dave."

"Hell, is he in this too? that must be 'Dago Dave.' That guy would cut your throat for fifty dollars. Any others?"

"Those were all I saw. No doubt Hobart's wife is in the house somewhere, guarding Natalie Coolidge probably."

"Six altogether, counting the women."

"Yes, and you better count them, for they will fight like tigers. The girl held me up at the point of a gun."

"We've got to get the drop first, that's all. They're yellow, the whole outfit is yellow. Shootin' in the back is their style. Now, you

know the lay inside the house; what is our best chance?"

West studied over the situation, his eyes staring into the darkness, and McAdams waited.

"Well, Mac," he said finally. "This is a new job for me, but I'd put a man out in front, and then take the others in through the back door. We'd have to rush it, of course. I know the front door is locked, and it couldn't be broken down quickly. I listened when those fellows went back, and I heard no click, as though they had locked the door behind them. They don't know anybody has been after them except me, and they believe I am done for. They feel so safe out here, they are a bit careless. I'll wager something we can walk straight in on the outfit; how does that strike you?"

"As the only feasible plan. Let's crawl out of here."

The arrangements were quickly perfected; a short, whispered conference in the dark; then one man crept silently away through the night toward the front of the house. McAdams added a few more words of instruction to the others, and, with West slightly in advance, revolvers drawn and ready, the five stole forward in the direction of the

rear porch. The windows were either heavily curtained, or covered by outside shades, for no gleam of light was anywhere visible. West mounted the back steps silently, with McAdams close at his heels. A second later the entire bunch of officers were grouped before the door, poised breathless, listening for any sound from within. Nothing broke the impressive silence, and McAdam's hand closed over the knob, which he turned slowly. The door opened quietly into a darkened interior. For an instant he bent forward, peering through the narrow crack, endeavouring to learn what lay hidden beyond, the others quivering behind him. There was scarcely the sound of a breath audible. The detective hesitated; such luck, such carelessness on the part of criminals seemed almost uncanny; he half suspected some trap. Then he became convinced that this was only the result of recklessness—the fellows felt so safe in this hidden hole in the woods as to neglect all precaution. He stepped cautiously inside, leaving the door ajar for the others to follow. Then they paused —straight ahead a double swinging door divided the kitchen in which they were from another room beyond. Through the centre crack shone a single bar of light, barely visible, and forth through that

same orifice came the sound of a voice speaking. McAdams flung up his hand in signal, and then crept silently forward.

It was apparently a quarrel among thieves over the spoils, each fearful lest the other was double-crossing. Hobart and "Red" Hogan were doing most of the talking, although occasionally others chimed in, and once there was a woman's voice added to the debate. Seemingly the whole gang were present; a strong odour of tobacco smoke stole through the crack in the door, and both Hobart and Hogan swore angrily. Who was to remain out there on guard while Hobart and the girl returned to Chicago for the money was evidently the question, Hogan wishing to accompany them to make sure of his share. The woman sided with Hobart, the other men apparently ranged up with "Red," and some very plain talking was indulged in.

McAdams listened grimly, the light through the crack showing his lips curled in a smile of appreciation. He lowered his head, and with one eye at the slight opening gained a glimpse of the lighted room beyond. A moment, motionless, he stared in on the scene; then straightened up, and, with revolver in hand, signalled to the others to close in closer. They stood there for a tense in-

stant, poised and eager; then the doors were flung crashing back, and they leaped recklessly forward, out of the darkness into the light. It was a furious fight—sharp, merciless, uncompromising. The thieves, startled, desperate, were hurled back by the first rush against the further wall, tables and chairs overturned, the shrieking woman pushed headlong into one corner, and one of the fellows downed by the crashing butt of a revolver. But the others rallied, maddened, desperate, rats caught in a trap, fighting as animals fight. Hobart fired, catching an assailant in the arm; Hogan snatched up a chair and struck viciously at West, who leaped straight forward, breaking the full force of the blow, and driving his own fist into the man's face. It was all over within a minute's fierce fighting—the surprise turning the trick. Hobart went down cursing, the gun kicked out of his hand, his arm broken; Hogan, struggling still, but pinned to the floor by three men, was given a blow to the chin which left him unconscious, while the other two threw up their hands and yelled for mercy. McAdams wiped his streaming face, and looked around.

It was a shambles, the floor spotted with blood, the table overturned and broken, a blanket over one of the windows torn down, a smashed chair in

one corner. The detective who had been shot was still lying in front of the door, "Red" lay motionless, a ghastly cut over his eye, and Hobart, his arm dangling, sat propped up against the wall, cursing, malevolent, but helpless. On the other side stood Sennett and "Dago Dave," their hands high above their heads; each looking into the levelled barrel of a gun. The woman had got to her knees, still dazed from the blow which had felled her. The ex-service man smiled grimly, well satisfied.

"Some surprise party, eh, Jim?" he asked pleasantly. "This rather puts a crimp in your little game, I would savy, old boy. Going to cop the whole boodle tomorrow, was you?"

"Who the hell are you?"

"Well, if I answer your questions, perhaps you will answer mine. I am McAdams of the City Hall Station, Chicago, and I know exactly what I am here after. So the best thing you guys can do, is cough up. Who's that girl who has been working with you?"

Hobart glared sullenly, but made no response.

"You'll not answer?"

"Oh, go to hell!"

"All right, old top. She is in this house some-

where, and can't get out. Somers, look around a bit; try behind those curtains over there."

The officer stepped forward, but at the same instant the draperies parted, and two girls stood beside each other in the opening, framed against the brighter glare of light beyond—two girls, looking so alike, except for dress and the arrangement of their hair, as to be almost indistinguishable—Natalie white faced, frightened, gazing with wide-open eyes on the strange scene before her; the other smiling, and audacious, her glance full of defiance. It was the voice of the latter which broke the silence.

"Am I the one you want, Mr. Bob McAdams?" she asked clearly. "Very well, I am here."

McAdams stared at them both, gulping in startled surprise at the vision confronting him, unable to find words. Then his eyes fixed themselves on the face of the speaker.

"What!" he burst forth. "You, Del? Great Scott! your name was Hobart, wasn't it? Why I never once connected you two together. Is—is this guy your father?"

"I don't know about that," she returned indifferently. "It is a matter of argument I believe. However, Bob, what's the odds now? I am the

one you're after, Mister fly-cop; and here I am."

She walked forward, almost proudly, her eyes shining, and gazing fearlessly into his. He stepped back, one hand extended.

"No, Del, this must be a mistake. I—I can't believe it of you, you—you are not a crook."

"Oh, yes I am," she insisted, but with a tremor in the low voice. "I've never been anything else, Bobby boy—thanks, thanks to that thing down there."

Natalie still remained poised uncertainly in the door-way, scarcely realizing what was occurring before her; she saw suddenly a familiar face, and held out her hands.

"Oh, Matt, what is it?" she cried. "Is—is it all over?"

"Yes, all over, dear; these are police officers."

"And that—that girl? She looks so much like me. Who is she? do you know?"

West clasped her hands tightly, his voice sunk to a whisper.

"She is your sister, Natalie," he asserted soberly, "Your twin sister."

Her unbelieving eyes swept to his face.

"My sister; my twin sister? But I had none."

"Yes, but you did," he insisted gently. "You never knew it, but Percival Coolidge did. This

was his devilish scheme, plotted years ago when you were born. Now here is the end of it—the girl is your sister. There is no doubt of that."

"No doubt, you say! My sister!" Her head lifted, and there was a flame of colour in her cheeks. "My sister!" she repeated, as though she would thus make it seem more true. "Then I will go to her, Matthew West."

She loosened the clasp of her fingers and walked forward, unseeing her surroundings, her eyes misted with tears. Straight across the room she went, her hands outstretched to where the other shrank back from her in embarrassment—between them still the gulf which love must bridge.

THE END

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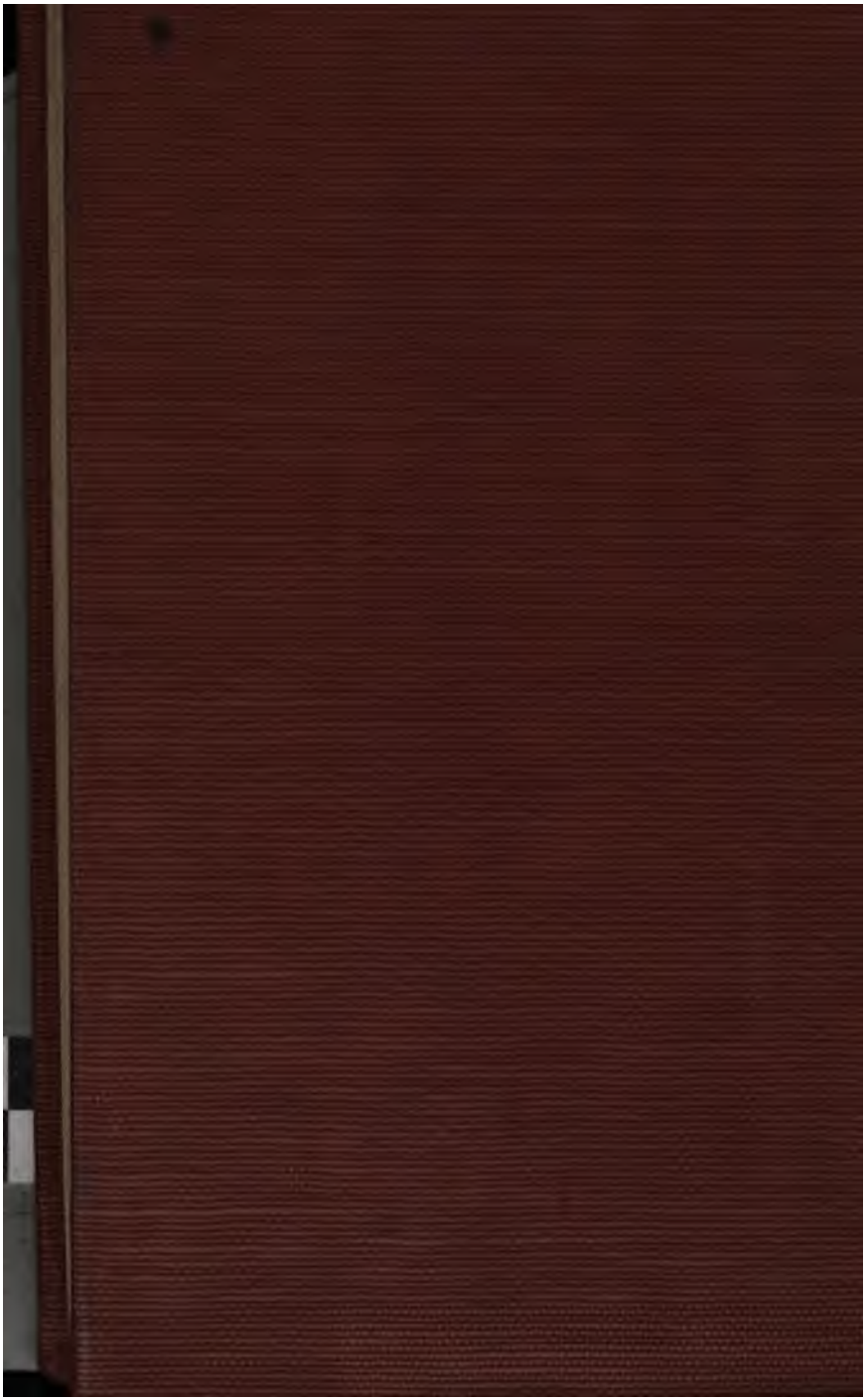
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